THE GAME AND THE CANDLE

BY

ELEANOR·M. INGRAM

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He carried her back to the cream-tinted boudoir

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TO THAT GRACIOUS FAMILY
CIRCLE OF WHICH I HAVE
THE HAPPINESS TO BE ONE

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THE GAME AND THE CANDLE

CHAPTER I

THE DECISION

"IT will last about six months," stated John Allard. "Afterward—"

His brother looked up at him helplessly.

"Afterward?" he echoed drearily.

"Afterward there must be more. It is not possible, simply is *not*, for poverty to approach Theodora and Aunt Rose. Look around you, Robert."

Under the clear California moonlight the jade-green lawns and terraces dropped one below the other to the distant road. Through them writhed the long serpentine drive and paths; dotted over them stood dark masses of flowering bushes or trees, with here and there the snowy gleam of a statue; over all floated the rhythmic tinkle of the

central fountain. Untroubled calm was the spirit of the place, hereditary comfort.

"I have looked so often, John. Yet, I find nothing."

"We must find not a little money, but a fortune, and we must find it in six months," John answered, his low voice just reaching his listener. "There is no way to earn it, we know. Inside the law there are ways to acquire it. Wall Street, for instance; a new popular song or two, an inexplicable conjuring trick, or a fresh breakfast food. But we have no such talents, you and I; we are just the ordinary gentlemen of leisure,—dilettanti. We are useless, within the limits set for us. Outside the limits, outside the law—"

The suggestion was left unfinished, the two men falling silent before it. They were young; so young that the morning mists of romance still blurred the sharp landscape of reality, and for the moment, daring appealed more than endurance.

"We could not do anything low," Robert demurred hesitatingly. "Not about the mortgages or business tangles, John."

"No, no," John agreed, flushing. "Of course not that. I suppose there is an honor even in crime, a class distinction. Sir Henry Morgan probably despised a common thief, and Paul Clifford would not pick his neighbor's pocket at dinner. No; we will pay our inherited debts, if we have to steal for it. What a *comédie-héroïque!*"

Robert regarded him seriously.

"You are just playing?" he doubted.

"I am not playing at all; only looking at things. For the time left us is not long. If we do nothing, this place will go, and with it all that Theodora and Aunt Rose call life. We must then take these women, Aunt Rose an invalid, Theo a spoiled and petted patrician, to some cheap city lodging, and there strive to support them. How, I haven't any idea. Some one might employ us as clerks, possibly. I have

traveled all over Europe and speak French and Italian; that is all my stock in trade, except an education."

"Mine is less."

"We have wasted our time thoroughly, if innocently. Now we pay. Do you wonder that I look at the outlaw's path that offers itself?"

His brother moved, startled.

"Offers itself, John?"

"Yes; I did not think of this without the prompting of circumstance. Are you dismayed, or shocked?"

"I can not see very clearly," Robert answered simply. "Or, rather, I keep seeing the wrong things. Nothing dismays me to-night except the idea of pain coming to Theo and her mother. I do not say it should be so; merely that it is. We are more ornamental than useful, we Allards, as you point out, but we have the art of loving. I think most people have a less capacity for it; I believe it is a certain intensity born with one—a gift, a talent. And we have it. Tell me more."

"I shall not tell you very much, because the work is only for one of us," John said. "One of us must go, the other stay here and live as always. One must still be master of Sun-Kist, still the head of this household of ours and an irreproachable citizen. He had better not know too accurately what the one who goes is doing."

"John!"

John Allard slipped impulsively from the veranda rail and came to sit on the arm of Robert's chair, drawing him into a caressing embrace.

"I know; we've always played together, dear old fellow. School and college, and the short time since,—the two years' difference between us got lost pretty early. But we must learn to go alone at last. And if we undertake this insanity—for it is little better—we must stand without flinching all it brings. Is it worth while? I do not know, but I know many a man has gone into the underworld to protect a woman. How many cashiers have misused funds entrust-

ed to them, how many business men have stooped to illegal methods, in order to give their wives—not necessities, but luxuries? We see it every day, this cowardice for some one loved. Only they do it by degrees, and we do it all at once."

Robert laid his hand over the one on his shoulder.

"It does not sound very pretty," he acknowledged wistfully. "It is the old legend of selling your ego to Mephistopheles. Only, I wouldn't so much mind going to Hades afterward; it is the clasping Mephisto's smudgy fingers that hurts."

"I am not asking you to do it, Bertie. We will just forget this half-hour, if you like. You know it was a suggestion, not a conviction, I voiced. You are right, of course. But I was ready for rebellion against all laws to-day; and then Desmond came to me—"

"Desmond! He is out of prison?"

"A week ago. He came to me for money to go East. 'Do you mind how you and Master

Robert used to sneak away from your nurse to play with Tommy, the coachman's boy?' he said to me. 'And now Tommy Desmond is nursed by the police far and near. I am a master at my trade, I am.' He has not changed much since we recognized him at his trial, five years ago, and tried to help him."

Robert turned to see the face above him in the moonlight.

"He said more than that."

"He was very frank," John answered laconically.

"Then, go on, please. I never meant that we should give up the last chance because it was unpleasant, or unsafe. Theo—she has just tasted her girlhood, just commenced to live; how can we let her lose it all? I would rather smudge my fingers in saving her than wear the bar sinister of cowardice. There are laws I know you will not break, because, being yourself, you can not. Go on, and tell me what Desmond said."

A white moth, hunting some star across the dark, dashed itself against Allard's coat and hung quivering there. He paused to disentangle the delicate wings before replying, the careful seriousness of the little action in itself a characterization.

"There has been shown to me a way to make enough money to thrust poverty out of sight for the present and find comfort for the future. A way to save Sun-Kist in the short time left us to command. But it is by a crime, a crime which the world calls as ugly as forgery. You know for what Desmond was punished. Yet it is in a certain sense the crime magnificent, in that one wrongs a government instead of an individual, and dashes the gauntlet into the face of the state itself. It is the crime that to the least degree smudges, because, after all, it offers a fair equivalent for value received."

"What do you mean?"

"The old mine is no longer worth operating; but there is silver in small quantities," Allard

replied quietly. "Enough for Desmond's use. Naturally, he never dreamed of making such a proposition to me. He simply told me how the affair could be carried out, as he told me a dozen other amazing possibilities and reminiscences. I encouraged him to talk, at first merely to dull the clamor of thought at my inner ear. In the end, I kept him near here."

"It's so real, John?"

"It's so real and so possible. I have satisfied myself of that. Either of us could carry the plan through, with Desmond; but we must realize that the one who undertakes it steps out of this life. For, facing the fact, disaster in the end is almost certain. The government machinery is very perfect; he who breaks the law can scarcely hope to escape arrest sooner or later. And if that happens, our world must never guess. Whoever accepts the work must leave here for an indefinite journey abroad, ostensibly; and in reality lose his identity absolutely somewhere. The one who goes must

endure in silence whatever happens; the one who stays—"

"Go on."

"The one who stays," John finished gently, "must not interfere or try to save."

Robert shuddered slightly and sat still for an instant.

"It is for the women," he said, his boyish voice quite steady. "Shall we draw lots, or will you let me go?"

"Bertie, Bertie!" John exclaimed, and, rising abruptly, walked to the rail.

When he came back to the seat beside his brother, it was with his face turned from the silver light pouring through the arches of the veranda.

"We are spared the pain of choosing our rôles, Bertie," he declared with grave finality. "The decision is not ours. Theodora cares for one of us. Aunt Rose admitted as much to me, although she herself could not say which. Of course that one is the one who stays. You see I

am just taking it for granted that we both love her. We have never talked about it, but we knew, I think."

"Yes."

John waited, but no more was volunteered.

"You agree with me?" he at last questioned.

"Oh, I suppose so!" Robert flung savagely. "John, I am not blind; if you propose this, it is because you are satisfied Theo will choose me. If you sacrifice everything to save Sun-Kist for the women, it is because you mean the sacrifice to be yourself. Tell the truth; if I were to go, you would refuse to carry out the plan."

"I said either of us could do the work."

"Yes, but you mean to do it yourself."

"I mean to leave the decision to Theodora."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly. And our time is short, Robert; ask her to-night when she comes home."

"I will not," he refused flatly. "Take your right as eldest and tell her your story before I tell mine. I will not take that advantage of you.

Oh, if she were only less delicate, less fastidiously reared, less unable to endure even vexation! If we could fight it out, you and I!"

"Hush, hush; this is the fight. We are paying the penalty of being fit for no better battle; he who can use neither sword nor gun must be sent to dig in the muddy trenches."

"We could take care of ourselves."

"Without doubt, or starve decently. But we have to take care of others."

"John, let me go."

"Play fair, Bertie."

"John—"

"And Theo?"

The younger dropped his head against the other's knee.

"I think your part will be harder than mine," John rejoined, after a long silence. "It is less difficult to suffer than to watch another endure. I can very well believe we are taking the wrong way, but I do not see a better. And for the—smudge—I have one consolation."

"That is, John?"

"The crime chosen is one the state finds it advisable to condemn for reasons of policy. It is not so actual a wrong to our fellow-men as a fortune made in Wall Street or in speculating on their necessities. I am going to break man's regulations, not God's law."

"I hope you are right," said Robert with equal reverence. "But you are taking an unblazed trail, and the safe road lies far aside."

Down the smooth slope of the country-side crept the vibrating throb of an automobile, accompanied by laughter and the faint sound of gay voices. Some one in the party was singing—a man whose clear tenor reached the two on the veranda, filtered to purest pathos through the veil of distance:

"*Sconto col sangue mio*
L'amor que posi in te!
Non ti scordar—non ti scordar di me—"

"That is Billy Clive," Robert identified wearily. "He is an arrant humbug, is Billy; I do not

believe he ever had a serious moment in his life. Theo is coming; will you speak to her? It may be you, after all, you know."

"I think not, Bertie."

"But you will try?"

Through the night air pierced the crescendo wail of a horn, startling the insect choirs into silence and waking a sleepy bird in the wistaria vines. Both men rose.

"If I must," John yielded. "Yet I have an idea it will not matter who speaks first, and perhaps you are not quite up to the task to-night. Yes, I will try."

"And try fairly. I," as the white lights of the car swung into the avenue, "I am going in."

Their hands met in passing, Robert turning to the house door and John descending the wide steps to greet the arrival.

"The most delicious time," pealed the sweet, high voice of a girl above the noise of the halted automobile. "Good night, Mrs. Preston. Until to-morrow, Sue and Billy. Oh, John, you!"

"Come over to-morrow, Allard," rang the merry chorus.

"Don't forget the hunt."

"Bring Robert, old man."

"*Adiós*, Theo."

The car started noisily, and whirled down the driveway.

"I am so tired," sighed the girl on the steps, gathering up her shimmering skirts and throwing back the hood of her cloak. "Mama has gone to bed, John? Oh, and I do want tea! Why should I not have tea at midnight, if I like? I love to be revolutionary."

"Why not, indeed? Sit down there in your chosen divan, my lady."

"You will bring me tea?"

"Wait only."

She sank laughing into a chair and began to draw off her long gloves, watching him as he moved to the little tea-table in a nook of the veranda. Allard possessed an almost feminine deftness at such tasks; perhaps it was as well

that Robert was not busied with the fragile china and glass that evening.

"It was a nice dance," Theodora mused aloud. "But then, almost everything is nice. Only I missed you and Robert. A dance without Robert is like a salad without cayenne."

"And a salad with cayenne?"

"Is the chief joy of life's dinner."

He brought the cup and she extended a slim, jeweled hand to receive it. Theodora had a somewhat oriental taste; odors of sandalwood and rose breathed from her laces, her white wrist sparkled with slender bracelets, and the high comb in her blonde hair held the glint of gems.

"Why do you not laugh at my epigram?" she demanded. "Thank you; I would say you were adorable if you did not already know it. Please give me a biscuit, and give yourself some tea. Why are you so serious to-night?"

"I had something to tell you, I think."

She waved a commanding spoon.

"Then sit down and begin."

But Allard remained silent, regarding her. It was not easy to begin. Moreover, the glamour of the future had fallen away, leaving the naked ugliness; and he was held by a prescient certainty that to-night ended for ever this gracious life.

"Robert is not up?" Theodora queried presently, too fine to insist on the suggested confidence.

"No. Are you sorry, Theo?"

Surprised at the tone, she glanced up, but the shadows were heavy where he sat.

"Why, yes, of course." And recovering herself, "Certainly; how could we exist without him?"

"How, indeed?" he echoed, rather too quietly for naturalness. "Suppose he were to go away?"

"I should expire immediately of ennui. You see, he and I have a bond of frivolity; while against you we all lean for support. You are very supporting, John; now, this tea," she laughed gleefully. "Robert probably would

have pressed champagne upon me, because it is less trouble to get."

"You might have made tea yourself," he suggested, drawing a branch of the wistaria to shade his face more completely.

"I hate to do things for myself. I hope that I never will have to."

"I hope not. But I promised to tell you something. I am going on a trip to South America; part business, part restlessness."

"You!"

"Why not? I can not play all the time, you know, not being a girl myself. I may be away only a few months, or—much longer. But let me be quite frank; surely you are aware Robert loves you, Theo. If I should not be home before you are married, still you will understand how much good I wish you both, and remember that I said this now. Forgive me for speaking of this; it is ventured because I start to-morrow."

She sat very still, and he heard her hurried breathing in the hush.

"I did not know you meant that," she said at last, her accents unsure.

"Or you would not have confessed? Never mind my blundering interference, little cousin; I have no wish so dear as that you two should care for each other. You are not angry?"

She rose abruptly to set down the cup, the shadows now a cloak for her.

"Angry? Oh, no; I have never learned to be angry with you. I— It is damp out here; I must go in. Good night, John."

"Good night, Theo," he responded with all gentleness. It was so wonderful, this exquisite timidity, this virginal shyness that only Robert should have seen. He saw her quivering as she passed him in the moonlight, her head averted.

But in the doorway she turned back.

"John, as we entered the avenue to-night, there was a man standing near the olive-trees. Mr. Preston stopped the car and called to ask what he did there. The man answered that he was waiting to see you about some gardening

work, but it was so late that you must have forgotten. He sounded honest, but Mr. Preston bade me warn you, saying that a man, once your father's servant, had just been released from prison, and might use a knowledge of Sun-Kist to attempt burglary. You will be careful?"

"I will be careful," he answered calmly. "Thank you, dear."

She slipped hurriedly across the threshold, as if in escape, ruthlessly tearing her thin gown upon the door-latch. Allard wearily rested his head against the column behind him, and so remained.

At the end of an hour he rose and went down across the moon-blanched lawns, walking steadily and directly toward the group of olive-trees. He knew for what Desmond was waiting, knew what answer would be given, and it seemed to him that he had already severed the connection between the present and the future. It seemed to him that not to-morrow, but to-night, he was taking leave of all things; that the unblazed trail

led straight on from behind those dark trees just beyond him.

The white statues stirred with the wavering shadows as he passed; the rich scent of the tuberoses called as a familiar voice; like a patter of tiny footsteps the ripple of the fountain followed.

CHAPTER II

THE KEY TO THE DOOR

"THE road you called, and I believed to be, an unblazed trail through a grave forest, I am beginning to see is just the old sordid, musty Bridge of Sighs across which common malefactors are led," wrote John Allard to Robert three months after his departure from Sun-Kist. "But if we can agree with Browning's dictum, there is a certain virtue simply in keeping on at a task assumed, even if the end be questionable. And I am keeping on. Do not fancy I am saying this to trouble you, or in weak regret. All is going better than we dared hope, as you know; and I see no danger near, at present. No; it is only that I have been fearing I gave you some edged doctrines; do not close your hand upon them, for they cut. You can not write to me, of course, since you do not

know where I am. Nor shall I myself write again, even with this guarded and unsigned precaution. When this venture ends, I am going away from America; I think I shall enlist in France's Foreign Legion. Not because I am afraid, but because I want to work. Yet, in spite of success, it seems to me that, like Saxon Harold, I hear a cry in the night: '*Sanguelac, the arrow, the arrow!*' "

There was nothing in the quiet, sun-filled, little hut nestled on the mountain-side, to indicate that here rested one end of the *Ponte degli Sospiri.* Yet to one of the two men here at bay, the dark bridge arched away as a thing visible.

A siege had been held there all the June afternoon, until now this grateful lull had fallen,—a siege whose tale was punctuated with the snap of bullets, the crash of loosened stones down the cliff, and the shouts of men below. No one yet had ventured on the steep, narrow path winding up to the hut, although there was but one de-

fender, and so far the battle had been bloodless. But neither the big Irishman leaning by the door, nor John Allard, lying helpless on a rough cot, had any doubt of the final result. They were simply waiting for the end to come.

"Desmond, have you hurt any of them?" Allard asked suddenly, rousing himself from a reverie bordering on stupor.

"I have not," answered the other in accents just touched with Hibernian softness. "But I am thinking they will not come up until dusk. Bird shot scatters."

"Our own men have gone safely?"

"They have. And if you had not slipped through that hole in the old floor and broken your ankle—"

Allard raised himself on his elbow. Fever lent an artificial brightness to his firm young face and shadowed gray eyes, the waving chestnut hair clung boyishly around a forehead which had acquired one straight line between the brows

during the five months since he had left Sun-Kist.

"You should not have stayed, Desmond," he said earnestly. "You can not help me; I have my own way out of this. You must go now, at least, and try the mountain. I ask you to go."

"And if I do, it must be at dusk. Look out that door; not a cloud or a shade—and me with a hundred yards of bare mountain-side to cross. Lie easy, sir."

"Desmond!"

"Oh, it's a word slipped! Old times are close enough for their ways to come to my tongue in the rush."

Allard shook his head, but sank back upon the pillow and let his gaze go out the open door opposite. Far below, the silver and azure Hudson widened into the Tappan Zee, set in purple and emerald hills which curved softly away to the distant outposts of the Palisades. Fair and tranquil, warmly palpitating under the summer sunshine, the scene was cruel in its placid indif-

ference to the struggle here upon the cliff-like mountain. The very breeze that fluttered in brought taunting perfumes of cedar and blossom from a country-side out of reach; poised airily between earth and sky, a snowy sea-gull flaunted its unvalued liberty. Sighing, the Californian dropped the curtain of his lashes before a world no longer his. He had been so near safety, the arrow had been held so long upon the cord, that disaster came now with a double keenness of stroke.

"Desmond," he said, after a pause, "we have nothing to do with old times or titles. I can trust your will, I know; but do not let your memory betray me. I mean, words *must* not slip. I hope you are going to get out of this safely; I can not, of course. After my—capture," a curious expression flickered across his face, "no matter how things end, you may count that I will say nothing of you or the others. Will you, at all times in the future, remember that I am just Leroy?"

"I will," the big man replied briefly. "And the others don't know anything."

"No; there is only you. You it would not help if the truth were made public; it would only excite more attention. You yourself do not want your former record connected with your stay here. If you escape, you will be free and comparatively rich; leave me my secret, Desmond; I shall have nothing else."

"You needn't worry about me," Desmond reassured, his eyes on the ribbon of path that was visible. "It might be better, I'm thinking, to do the worrying about how you'll come out of this."

"*Fiat justicia,*" Allard returned, with a cool endurance quite free from bitterness. "Or, more intelligibly, I must pay for my cakes and ale. Only carry your part through, and do not talk."

"You needn't worry. There's a man around that big boulder down there! Will I have to shoot bird seed at his legs, I wonder?"

"Not if you can avoid!"

"Oh, I'm not playing at it; rest easy. And don't fear they'll be believing it's you. When they find me gone and you not able to stand, they'll guess who was shooting. I'll put all the guns beyond your reaching them, to help, before I go to-night."

"No!"

The swift monosyllable fell with an energy that brought Desmond's glance at once to the speaker.

"I shall want my revolver," Allard added more quietly. "I might need it."

"Just so," assented the other, regarding him oddly, and presently returned to his guard of the door.

There was a long silence. Gradually the fluffily piled clouds in the west became tinged with ruddy gold, clouds which bore a fanciful resemblance to Elysian mountain peaks, as if heaped so in sport by some imitative baby Titan who had patterned them from the hills below. Sunset was at hand, and from its brightness Allard

wearily averted his face. Suffering, mental and physical, keyed his nerves to exquisite sensitiveness; a passionate desire for darkness and silence possessed him.

Suddenly the roaring crash of the huge shotgun set the cottage vibrating, and echoed heavily back and forth among the cliffs.

"It's only to scare them," explained Desmond, as his companion started up. "But I doubt they will wait past dusk. And we needed just one week more!"

"You mean they will rush the place by daylight? You will go now?"

"I need the dusk more than they do. Still, I won't wait long. You—shall I get you water? —you moved too quick!"

"It is nothing," Allard panted. But he drank gratefully from the tin dipper, nevertheless, and in returning it searched with gentler eyes the hard, intelligent countenance of the giver. "It is nothing I can not face, all this, if I can be certain you will keep silence."

"I will," he said, and walked back to the door in cautious vigilance.

Allard lay still. Evening: Theodora would be on the veranda in her pretty dinner gown, perhaps with a flower tucked over her little ear in the Spanish fashion she mimicked, if this were home. Aunt Rose would be reading in her favorite chair, Robert lounging near them and pouring out his usual flood of sparkling gaiety and nonsense. Allard smiled tenderly and with a touch of defiance; after all, he had won the battle fought for them, had carried out the task set, before to-day's ruin overtook him. Moreover, he had his own way of escape, resolved upon since the first. He almost could be content.

"It's growing dark," broke in Desmond's voice after a time. "I'm thinking they'll be making that rush mighty soon. I'd give something to take you along, instead of having to climb like a cat up the bluff."

Allard roused himself.

"Not possible! You should have gone with

the rest instead of being here now." He held out his hot hand for the other's clasp. "Good-by, Desmond. Without you this thing would never have worked at all."

"It's not so. Many a time this game has been tried and has fallen through half-way; and it's not thousands are made at it. You did it, with the gentleman's brain and knowledge and wit. Not that it matters now."

"Not very much. You are forgetting my revolver."

"No, I am not forgetting. You will not need it." He turned away to add the last one to the pile of weapons in the opposite corner.

Allard rose on his arm, his eyes flashing wide and keen.

"You have no idea what I need, Desmond. Give me that revolver."

"You would shoot no one, and it would be of no use."

"Desmond, we have been friends; give me that."

"I can't," he answered sullenly.

"Why not?"

"Because I know for what you want it, sir."

Allard flung back his head and confronted the defiant face opposite with the fevered anger of his own.

"And if so, is it your affair? Have you, you who have led your life, grown sentimental? You, who know from where I come and to where I am going,—you will interfere? You are wasting our time; give me my revolver, and go."

But the other made no move, although sending an anxious glance through the doorway.

"One gets out of prison," he said obstinately, "as I've tried myself. But that that you mean —there's no coming back. You are over young for that, sir."

"You have been paid for helping me," Allard retorted, his voice savage with pain, "not for teaching me philosophy. Go take your liberty, if you can, and leave me mine. There is one door out for me, and one key. I trusted you; I might

have kept the thing with me if I had imagined this."

Desmond flushed, but turned coolly.

"I'll go, it's time. If I was paid for helping, I gave the help. I never was paid for this you are asking."

"Desmond, Desmond, you leave me so!"

He turned on the threshold, a square, obstinate figure against the violet twilight.

"I'd never do it," he said quite gently, "if I didn't know you'd thank me some day."

"Desmond—"

"Good-by, sir."

"Desmond—"

The doorway was empty; the evening serenata of a robin filled the hush. Allard's head sank on his arm in the darkest moment of the last somber months.

But presently he looked up again. Still dressed as when the accident had happened a few hours before, he possessed a tiny box of cartridges, and only the width of the room separated him

from his desire. He impulsively tossed aside the blanket and slipped to the floor.

The fall drew a gasp of pain. All before faded to insignificance beside the anguish of movement. It was not the ankle only; the injury had gone farther than that. Colorless, catching his breath with difficulty, Allard dragged himself inch by inch toward the goal.

Desmond was almost forgotten when the first shot on the mountain-side rang out. Startled from the mists of suffering, Allard paused an instant. Then as a very fusillade reverberated among the cliffs, he toiled on with redoubled haste. They would come next for him.

It had a pearl and silver handle, that revolver. He had treasured it because it was a gift from Robert, and a souvenir too frequently duplicated to betray his identity. Now the pearl shone a glistening spot in the surrounding grayness, beckoning, tantalizing. It was so far across the room, so very far!

Shots again! He struggled yet more des-

perately, and the resulting pang brought waves of faintness above his head. If he could only rest, so.

Some one was shouting, half exultantly, half fearfully, and other voices replied in equal excitement. Some one was killed, they were saying, had fallen from the cliff. Desmond, perhaps? Allard roused himself fiercely and saw with gratitude how near the coveted object lay. A little farther, only a little; but it cost.

The rush and patter of feet grew louder,—the steady approach of the hunters. It hardly mattered, for the cool white handle was in the grasp of his outstretched hand. He had won, won doubly. He had accomplished his task, and he held the key to the door. Robert's face leaned toward him, warm with relief and praise; Theodora was in the room, bringing fragrances of sandalwood and rose—

Once more he drove back the mists and dragged the revolver to him, smiling, but with knit brows.

CHAPTER III

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS

THEY looked at each other steadily, the distinguished visitor and the prisoner who polished a brass railing. Beside them an official was droning a particularly monotonous and dreary account of the institution, his eyes half-closed with the mental exertion of recollection, his thoughts turned inward and absorbed. There were several gentlemen and officers of the building in the bare room, chatting with one another in varying degrees of boredom and interest, and completely ignoring the quiet prisoner who had been John Allard. Yet he was perhaps the only one present, with the exception of the man facing him, who escaped the commonplace.

"You have something to say?" questioned the grave, lustrous dark eyes of the visitor; eyes

southern in their long-lashed softness, northern in their directness.

And Allard's gray eyes returned assent with an utter calm which overlay the surface of tragedy.

"On the east bank of the Hudson, six miles above Tarrytown," went on the droning voice of the official, then broke as the visitor's cool, slightly imperious tones fell across the monologue:

"Ah, and is it permitted to speak with your inmates, if one has the fancy?"

The official stared, but smiled vaguely.

"Certainly, sir; if *you* wish," he replied.

Again the eloquent glances of the other two crossed.

"You have much of this work?" queried the visitor, the words scarcely heeded either by speaker or listener in the deeper search for a means of communication.

Allard answered in French, the fluent, barely-accented French of a traveled American:

"That man in gray who accompanies you, monsieur, the man near the window, is not to be trusted. He was released from this place last year, after serving a term for his share in some Paterson anarchistic outrages. He is dangerous, and he watches you constantly."

The visitor was trained to self-control; he did not commit the mistake of looking toward the man in question. But he could not quite check the flash of blended emotions which crossed his own expression.

"Thank you," he said. And after an instant, "I thought I recognized you when I saw you on entering; now you have spoken, I am certain. Yet—"

Allard flushed from throat to temples, the color dying out again to leave even his lips white. But his reply was steadily given.

"There is no one here whom you know, monsieur, or who knows you. Even a prison has its courtesies. Turn your head away, and go past," he said.

"Would you have done so, finding a friend in such a strait?"

"I have no friends."

"Then why did you warn me against Dancla, my anarchistic secretary yonder?"

The question was unexpected, and left Allard momentarily disconcerted.

"Confess we knew each other very well five years ago," the visitor added gently, and paused to consider.

A few paces off the official stood stupidly enjoying the respite from exertion; placidly indifferent to an incomprehensible conversation inspired by a whim of the guest. The other three or four men were admiring the view from a window facing the river, and listening to their cicerone.

"I wish you would go away, monsieur," Allard said only, when he had recovered perfect command of himself.

"Be patient with me yet a moment. We were both avowedly masquerading during those weeks

of boyish frolic at Palermo; do you know who I am?"

"No more than I knew then: that you were a European, and evidently of position."

"You have more liberty than some of those here, I think."

"Yes; I am what they call a trusty;" the straight line between the fine brows deepened markedly.

"I beg your pardon; I do not ask from curiosity. My yacht is anchored before this place—if I return through here in an hour, on my way to it, can you be here still?"

Allard hesitated.

"I believe so, but I would prefer not. I can aid you no further; and—"

"And?"

For an instant the curtain was withdrawn from the prisoner's clear eyes.

"You wake what is better asleep. It is not pleasant for me to meet you, monsieur."

The visitor caught his breath. It came to him

with a shock of realization that many days and nights might pass before he could forget that straight glance of quivering pain and humiliation, of proudly endured hopelessness.

"Yet I ask it," he insisted.

"Very well. If I am not here it will be because it was not possible."

The visitor turned away with well-assumed carelessness.

"I fancied your prisoner there was a fellow-countryman," he remarked to the official, in passing on. "But he appears to be French."

"Yes, sir. He said he came from the South, at his trial."

The man had necessarily kept beside the visitor to reply, and they walked down the room so together.

"What is he here for?" came the idle inquiry.

"Counterfeiting, sir. Right over on that mountain across the river, they captured him and killed one of his comrades. The rest got away in time, and they never were found because this

man would tell nothing, even to save himself. He might have turned state's evidence and got off with a light sentence, for he was young and not known to the police. But he wouldn't and he got the whole thing. Leroy, his name is. The officers who captured him believe he never meant to be taken alive; for they found him unconscious, with a little pistol in his hand, and they guessed that he fainted before he could use it. He had to spend weeks in a hospital before he could be tried, getting over a broken ankle and some other worse injuries. But he and his fellows had done clever work, no one knows how much. This Leroy might have been from across the water, as you say, sir; no one knows him here."

"How long has he been here?"

"Two years, sir."

"And his sentence?"

"Fifteen."

The visitor shuddered involuntarily. Pleased by his interest, the official brightened to offer further diversion:

"If you'll come to the inner building, sir, I can show you some more. We've some in for life—"

"Thank you," the visitor refused bruskly, and moved aside to rejoin his companions.

The little group fell silent and expectant at the approach of the one whose escort they were. It was rather a brilliant group against the somber prison background. Dancla, "the man in gray" of Allard's warning, was the only member not in uniform, with the exception of the distinguished visitor himself.

"I am going into the town," their chief announced, pausing before them, "with Dancla. You may return to the yacht. Vasili, send the launch for me in an hour. Ah, and leave on that bench by the door my rain coat; I fancy it will be storming before we return. You understand?"

"Perfectly, your Royal Highness," responded Vasili, a trim, blond young aide-de-camp with a most ingenuous smile. He spoke in French, as did all the party.

"I alone have the honor of accompanying your

Royal Highness?" Dancla asked, not without a shade of uneasiness.

The velvet black eyes of his chief passed over him deliberately.

"You alone; come."

They went out, attended by the prison officials, past the prisoner still at work. Laughing and chatting, the rest of the party walked down the room to the door nearest the river. The place left seemed darker for their going, the silence more profound after their gay voices.

"We knew each other very well five years ago—"

When the patient has apparently reached the climax of suffering, when the very excess of pain brings a relief of numbness, Fate the Inquisitor occasionally finds amusement in devising a fresh form of putting the question. Upon Allard was forced the San Benito of renewed recollection.

Nearly five years before, John Allard, in all his gay insouciance of twenty-one years, had

spent an hour on the quay at Palermo to enjoy the limpid Sicilian night. Alone at first, he was presently joined by a young officer with whom he had crossed from Italy a few days before and formed a slight shipboard acquaintance. Knowing nothing of each other, there had nevertheless sprung into life between them that curious sympathy and friendliness which can be born of exchanged glances, meeting smiles; that sudden inexplicable liking which can make two passing strangers turn to gaze wistfully after each other and vaguely resent the trick of chance that has set their feet in opposite paths. It is one of the common phenomena of existence, but it was new to Allard, and perhaps new to his companion as well.

They sat side by side while evening melted into night, starlight into late moonrise; and they chatted of everything tangible and intangible suggested by the place and the time. But they did not touch the personal note until the cathedral chimes were pealing midnight.

"I must go back," commented the European wearily. "I have had my last day."

"Your last day!" Allard echoed, startled.

"Of freedom, yes. I was promised a month's vacation; a month to spend as I chose, but I have good reason to know the promise has been revoked. Oh, not for any cause,—just my uncle's whim. He is fond of playing with me so."

"Do you always do what he says?" queried young America incredulously.

"I have that habit; it is safer, and more virtuous. Still, virtue palls when its reward is invisible. When I go back to the hotel, Petro will hand me a telegram demanding my return to the Empire."

"Then I would not go back to the hotel," was the blithe suggestion. "Run before you are told to stay. Come share my bachelor hut and let Rome vociferate for a while."

"You are not in earnest," said the other, turning to look at him with an odd, eager surprise.

Allard had not been, but he adopted his own

idea with the light-hearted impulsiveness of his *bel age*.

"Why not? My people—my brother and aunt and cousin—have gone for a glimpse of Germany; and I have stayed here to cram for my last year of college. I have a delicious miniature villa five miles out of town, which I have taken until their return, and which is a thousand times too big for me alone. Come stay out your vacation with me. If your uncle promised you a month, he can not complain if you take it. It is not your fault if you do not receive his old telegram."

"No. I am not supposed to know it is coming."

"Well, then, why not come? Send a note to your servant at the hotel, and tell him you are visiting a friend. He will have to telegraph your uncle that you are not to be found."

The European stood up and looked out across the shining water.

"I am nearly twenty-seven years old," he

stated, "and I have never in my life had one week of my own. If you are serious, I will do this."

"Of course I am serious. We will have the time of both our lives. Come," the spirit of adventure in his veins, "you can write your note in that trattoria over there, and pay a boy to take it. We shall then make a straight dash for Villa Giocosa."

"You do not know me, and I can not tell you my name without spoiling all. If I tell you, we can not ignore it, try as we may."

Allard paused, then laughed out in sheer delight at the situation.

"I forgot all about names; I believe you do not know mine, for that matter. But come incognito, if you choose. I will even play host incognito, if that will arrange matters. Monsieur, my Christian name is John."

Youth, and the South, and the romance-freighted Sicilian night!

"You are very good," said the other simply. "I am called Feodor."

They went home to Villa Giocosa.

The three weeks which followed were a charming and graceful incident to Allard, an interlude in his happy, pleasantly-filled life. What they were to his companion, the American did not realize until long afterward. The two young men read or lounged together in the mossy garden, boated on the placid sea, talked and smoked through the tranquil evenings in the perfection of comradeship. But they kept the playful incognito, calling each other Don John and Don Feodor in the pretty Italian custom of the island where they met. Yet there was a difference, for the frank and communicative Allard soon laid all his past and present open to view, while the other never spoke of himself.

"How much you know!" exclaimed Allard, one day when Don Feodor came to the aid of the college man and passed from complicated subject to subject with the light surety of a master of each.

"I ought to know something; I have been

trained in a school that concedes no rest," was the composed reply.

The idyl ended abruptly. One sun-gilded, flower-scented noon, a messenger was ushered into the villa garden. In silence Don Feodor accepted and read the letter brought, in silence wrote and gave to the bearer his answer. And then he turned to his dismayed host.

"They have found me," he said quietly. "Of course you can not realize how I shall remember this time; you are too happy."

That was all. But Allard had remembered also; remembered the breathless, hot hush of noon, the heavy perfume of orange- and lemon-blossoms, as they shook hands in the old garden, and the sense of boyish desolation with which the farewell had left him.

"We knew each other very well, five years ago—"

The prisoner bent his head over his work, setting his white teeth in his lip until his mouth was bitter with the taste of his own blood.

The short spring day drew toward its close. The threatened storm marshaled its gray columns down the river, a sighing rain whispered around the building of sorrows. Very early, shore and water alike blended into vague, indeterminate dusk.

Rather less than the hour fixed had elapsed when the distinguished visitor, who had once worn the name of Don Feodor instead of that journalistic title, reëntered the upper end of the hall. He came accompanied only by the same stolid official as before; Dancla had disappeared.

Opposite the prisoner he paused to light a cigarette, then hesitated, looking from him to the little gold case in his own hand.

"I am going out again with this officer," he said in French, his casual tone excellently feigned. "Go to that river door, put on the coat lying upon the bench and the cap you will find in a pocket, then walk slowly to the barred gate and wait for me. When I come, salute me and follow."

Allard stiffened to rigidity, his eyes seeking the other's.

"I am guilty of what they accuse; do you still wish this?" he demanded.

There was something more than admiration in the visitor's smile.

"Did you question me in Palermo, or did you accept caste as enough? Yes, I wish it." He turned to the official and offered him the gold case. "I wanted to give the poor devil a cigarette," he explained. "But he says it is not allowed. Ah, I have forgotten to sign your register; will you come back?"

"Yes, sir," readily consented the man, curiously inspecting the diminutive, gold-tipped, perfumed cigarette lying in his ample palm. The nicotine bon-bon touched his massive sense of the ludicrous; he was still contemplating it as he led the way back.

When the two vanished, Allard went swiftly down the long room, casting around him a glance of feverish scrutiny. He reached the door as a

great gong announced the time when he should have returned from his work. Snatching up the coat, he slipped into it, pulled out the yachting cap with its gilt insignia, and finding a pair of gloves, drew them over his stained hands. So far well!

The most dangerous part, the journey across the broad, open wharf under the gaze of the armed guards in the towers, at least gave him the tonic of the sweet, wet air.

"I need John Allard's unshaken nerves," he told himself grimly. "If I reach there, perhaps I can believe he still exists."

The cloudy twilight, just light enough to show his conventional outline, just dark enough to veil discrepancies, aided him. He walked quite slowly and naturally, carefully avoiding puddles, stopping once to turn up his collar against the drizzling rain. Several times he looked back for his companion, and strolled on again.

A dozen eyes watched the self-possessed figure as he leaned nonchalantly upon the barred gate,

and passed from him to the more interesting spectacle of the small white launch and immaculate crew waiting outside.

There was little time, and the visitor, now with three attendant officials, moved slowly across the space.

"God," prayed Allard dumbly, leaning against the gate in anguished waiting. "I think I have paid; but if not, let them shoot—to kill."

The group came nearer, halted. Allard drew himself stiffly erect and raised his hand in salute as the tallest man came opposite, then obeyed a slight movement of direction and stepped behind him. A grating of locks, a brief exchange of compliments, and for the first time in two years the prisoner stood without the barriers. Free, if only for that instant, free, and in reach of the lapping river.

The sailors waited at rigid salute, the visitor stepped into the swaying launch, and as Allard followed the gate closed—behind him. The tiny engine puffed, caught its beat, and the boat

darted toward the dim white shape out in the stream.

Lights were flashing up here and there in the buildings, shining through the barred windows. To see the uncheckered sky again!

At the throb of their motor the yacht gleamed unexpectedly into an outline of myriad-pointed fire. Men ran across the decks, a miniature staircase fell in readiness.

"Follow me closely," directed the cool voice, when the launch stopped.

The wet, shining deck, the mutely respectful figures waiting to receive them, all blurred into insignificance for Allard. As his foot touched the yacht, pandemonium broke loose in the prison. Out over shouts and gong crashed the deafening roar of the huge whistle, rousing the country-side for miles around.

"It means?" questioned the master of the situation.

"They know I am missing—and they will think to search the yacht first."

"They will not search it without my consent, but I shall grant it. Come."

A hand closed on Allard's arm; he was guided swiftly down a tinted and gilded companionway, across several rooms no less brilliant, and finally halted in a jewel box state-room.

"The clothes lie ready; get into them as soon as possible and come back to me. Lose no time, and toss the things you wear into that chest," came the directions. "I dare send no one to aid you."

"I understand," Allard answered, equally collected. In those Palermo days, it had been Don John who had lent Don Feodor a dinner dress; there would be little difficulty in the substitution now.

The other man went out to the salon. Touching a bell on the table, he gave his outer garments to the attendant who appeared.

"I shall not dress for dinner," he stated. "Let it be served here, now."

"Your Royal Highness is obeyed."

"And my companion is a gentleman who takes Dancla's place; let the suite be arranged for him."

"Yes, your Royal Highness."

His Royal Highness sat down in an arm-chair, his dark eyes more drowsily lustrous than usual as he listened to the din on shore. His old-world beauty of feature was characterized very strongly by the locked tranquillity of expression seen in those who live constantly under the observation of others; he wore a mask of repose not readily lifted.

It was not long before Allard came out, and closing the door behind him, stood for a moment regarding his host with an expression that blended all thoughts in its passionate intensity. And prepared as he was for the change, remembering as he did the Don John of Palermo, the other yet returned the gaze with startled admiration and wonder. This gentleman, who proclaimed his class in bearing, glance, in the very poise of his head with its short, waving chestnut

hair of patrician fineness,—how had he been confounded for one hour with the under-world? Who had found the stamp of criminality in the strong, fine, sorrowful face?

"Monsieur," said Allard, taking a step forward.

Recalled, the host rose at once.

"Pardon a thousand times; I must remember you are the guest now and that this is not Villa Giocosa. But I can not play incognito any more. I have told my people that you come to take the place of my late secretary, Dancla—the man of whom you warned me—so you comprehend that it would never do for us not to know each other. I am Feodor Stanief."

Too aloof from recent European news, too long separated in thought from his former careless knowledge of such things, the name awoke in Allard only a vague sense of familiarity.

"If you have so much patience, or care for the old days, I will tell you my story whenever you choose, monsieur," he answered frankly and with

dignity. "Until then, may I still give you the half-truth of Villa Giocosa and bear the name of John?"

The soft tinkle of china interrupted them. Stanief had only time to reply with his unexpectedly brilliant smile, before the servant entered the salon.

"I shall have pleasure in claiming the confidence, Monsieur John," he returned, "and may have one to give, if you concede what I hope. Marzio, what is that uproar outside?" turning to the servant.

"Your Royal Highness, it is not known. The people on shore are much disturbed."

"Apparently. If we were home, Monsieur John, I should call it a riot; but here—" he shrugged his shoulders and moved toward the table.

Allard followed, noting for the first time the title given the other. Interpreting his glance, Stanief nodded intelligence as the servant withdrew for an instant.

"Yes; a mere formality, but one it is not safe to ignore in our delicate position. To speak otherwise might draw attention."

Allard looked across the miniature dining table, of which the shaded candles and slim vase of flowers, the translucent crystal and frosty silver, all seemed to typify and insist upon the life which so strangely claimed him; and gazing at the author of this, the gray eyes grew splendidly luminous with something for which gratitude was too pale and colorless a term. All the hoarded emotion of the last two years, all the despair and desolation, added their strength to his eloquent regard. Receiving it, Stanief's own eyes grew warm and almost femininely sweet. No speech could have told so much. When the servant reëntered and the lashes of both men fell, a chain unbreakable had been forged, the clearness of wordless understanding was between them.

Neither spoke during the first course. The rapid beat of a small engine finally disturbed the

silence, telling of a launch approaching from shore.

"Try your Sauterne," advised Stanief quietly.

Allard obeyed. The food nauseated him, the heavy pulse of his own heart seemed tangled with the nearing throb of the boat; the suspense was physical pain. The wine helped, sending its vivifying warmth along his numbed nerves.

"You know," the tranquil voice added, "this ship is foreign ground. There are a few formalities attached. We should have a little time, even—"

Allard lifted his head with a quick breath.

"Once, in such an hour, I asked one whom I believed a friend to leave me a revolver," he said. "Not being of the class, he refused. If there should be—a little time, I will make that request of you, your Royal Highness."

"And I am of the class. But there are many things before that."

Voices on deck, hurrying feet, stilled the sentence.

"Thank you," Allard answered, and waited.

Marzio again, deftly removing plates, changing glasses. Then another entrance,—the blond Vasili who had accompanied Stanief that day.

"Well?" queried his chief.

"Your Royal Highness, Captain Delsar respectfully begs an interview."

"Why?"

"Your Royal Highness, a boat from shore has arrived and the officers request permission to search the yacht for an escaped prisoner."

"Is that the reason for the din they are creating?"

"Yes, your Royal Highness."

Stanief selected a cigarette and pushed the tray toward Allard.

"Of course they have no right to do so," he replied indifferently, "but I have no objection. Let them search, by all means. Tell Captain Delsar to aid them all he can, although, unless he swam, there was no way for a man to reach the yacht except on the launch which brought

Monsieur John and me. Monsieur John, let me introduce Lieutenant Paul Vasili."

Allard turned to acknowledge the other's friendly salute. Stanief faced the door, which consequently was behind his companion.

"Give the message, Vasili, and say the yacht is open to them; even these rooms, if they wish. And tell the captain that we sail in an hour. That is all."

Silence again. Allard mechanically maintained the pretense of eating with each course while in reality he knew nothing but the faint sounds of the search and the intermittent roar of the whistle.

With the coffee came Vasili once more. Stanief nodded permission for the message.

"Your Royal Highness, the officers from the prison have finished. As a matter of form, they would accept your Royal Highness' offered consent and glance in here, in order to report every part of the yacht examined."

"Very good; admit them. Marzio, why have

you this electric light over the table? Turn it out; the candelabra and the side lights are ample."

Both orders were promptly obeyed. Vasili disappeared and the flaring light went out, leaving the room softly glowing with rosy color. Stanief looked into the set face opposite with the first trace of annoyance on his own.

"I forgot the coat, left on the bench all the afternoon. If any one saw it—"

Allard made a movement, then the door behind him opened.

"Come in, officer," Stanief invited pleasantly. "You are satisfied with a mere survey, or do you wish to carry it farther? I think either Mr. John or I have been in this room, however, since we came aboard at half-past five."

"Yes, sir," answered an embarrassed voice, a voice which for months had represented autocracy for Allard. "We just want to report a complete search, sir. I'm sorry to trouble."

Stanief lighted a cigar, letting the man slowly



"Come in, Officer," Stanief invited pleasantly Page 64

take in the scene. The gorgeous, velvet-draped salon, the last course of the dinner, the serene "distinguished visitor,"—there was no clue here. And certainly there was nothing to suggest a desperate convict in the gentleman in evening dress whose back was to the door, and who stirred his café noir so indifferently.

"Why did you fancy he came to the yacht?" Stanief inquired.

"Oh, excuse me, sir; it was only one chance. We thought he might have got to the river and swam for here. You see, it would be pretty hard to get out the other way in his clothes."

Allard raised his head impulsively.

"Why," he began, then remembered the punctilious Vasili and checked himself. "I beg pardon, your Royal Highness."

A gleam of amusement flickered across Stanief's black eyes at the quickly-learned etiquette.

"*Faîtes,* my dear John," he granted, waiving the point.

"It occurred to me that your Royal Highness had ordered a rain coat to be left on the bench by the rear door, and when we returned it was not there. Could it be possible—"

"That it was stolen?" caught up Stanief, grasping the audacity of the idea. "Undoubtedly so. I fancied my order neglected and intended rebuking the one responsible. Officer, behold your clue: a hatless man in an English rain coat."

The phrase captivated the man's dull imagination.

"A hatless man in an English rain coat," he echoed, fascinated. "Yes, sir, thank you, sir. We will telegraph all around. If I may go, sir—"

"You are quite certain he is not aboard? I do not wish to carry any dangerous stowaways, and we sail at once."

"Quite sure, sir. I must waste no more time."

"Good night, then. I imagine you will have no more trouble with that prisoner."

"Oh, no, sir," not understanding the double meaning. "Not after this. A hatless man in an English rain coat! Good night, sir."

"Marzio," said Stanief, when the door closed, "you may bring some cognac, and leave us. No one enters."

Voices on deck, hurrying feet, and presently the retreating throb of a little engine.

"Drink your cognac, Monsieur John."

"Thank you."

"Bah, your nerves are superb, but they pay beneath your stillness. Drink; I warn you that I have the habit of domination."

Allard drank.

CHAPTER IV

THE BOND

THE habit of domination Stanief assuredly had, however gracefully it were disguised. Nor was Allard, bruised with conflict, exhausted, dazed, in the mood to resist. He desired feverishly to speak; to tell his story and let Stanief, fully informed, decide whether the aid already given was to be continued further. The idea of a deception, a false belief in an injustice suffered by him, was intolerable. But Stanief smilingly imposed silence, and he yielded passively.

The cigars burned out slowly, the tumult on shore died away. A quivering vibration awoke to delicate life the yacht. Stanief smoked or played with his coffee-cup, his heavy double fringe of lashes brushing his cheek; Allard

leaned back in his chair, less in reverie than in utter exhaustion.

Exactly as the bells rang the hour came the metallic clank of anchor chains. The yacht shuddered under the screw, the glass and china tinkled faintly, then all settled into regularity as the engines fell into their gait and the beautiful boat moved down the river.

"And Vasili is out there in poignant distress because he can not come in 'to have the honor to report that we sail,'" remarked Stanief, breaking the long pause. "It was daringly conceived, Monsieur John, but were you not a trifle imprudent in speaking before that brilliant visitor of ours? Your voice?"

Allard aroused himself abruptly.

"Our speech back there was confined to monosyllables," he answered. "No, your Royal Highness, I think there was no risk."

Stanief did not deprecate the title, perhaps unnoting, perhaps willing to let the other learn.

"We are on the high seas, and quite free from

listeners," he said composedly. "I ask no questions, demand nothing of you, but if you indeed wish to speak of the closed episode, Monsieur John, I am ready. After to-night we shall have other things to occupy us."

Allard leaned forward eagerly, his clear gray eyes baring to the other man all their tragedy and compelling truth.

"I want you to know, it is your right to know," he answered, with a very fierceness of pride and sorrow. "I am going to place in your power more than you have given me to-day. Hand me to those who hunt me, give me the pistol promised and the word to use it, but keep my confidence. Forgive me, I am not distrustful, only trying to show what I mean."

"I understand."

Allard looked down at the polished surface of the table, his pallor deepening if possible, then suddenly brought his eyes back to Stanief's and began to speak.

It was a very quiet story, very quietly told.

It had never occurred to the Anglo-Saxon Allard to idealize his course into heroism; even mistaken heroism. Rather, he had learned to see more clearly, to condemn himself, during those long, bitter months. He bore no resentment for the punishment inflicted; simply it seemed to him that he had paid enough. Over the weeks of suffering in the hospital, the bitterness of the public trial with its torturing dread of recognition, he passed in a few brief words. Of Theodora he spoke only as his cousin and as Robert's betrothed; yet dimly he felt that the mute Stanief was reading all he left untold.

"There was no other way," he concluded, and the phrase was the key-note to all. "Undoubtedly it was the wrong way, but there was no other I could find, and I had to take care of them."

So far he had spoken of those he loved merely by their relationship. It was the final trust that Stanief asked by his next question:

"Will you tell me your name?"

And Allard laid his heart in the other's hand.

"John Leslie Allard," he answered.

There was an instant's pause. Stanief folded his arms on the table and spoke in his turn with no less quiet sincerity.

"Of the ethics of what you have told me, Monsieur Allard, I am perhaps not a good judge. I come from one of the world's greatest countries, where from sovereign to peasant necessity is an excuse for all things. I have seen the highest officials of the state stoop to accept systematic bribery; I have seen nobles whose blood was filtered unmixed through centuries, tricking one another and the Emperor who trusted them; I have seen the commanders of the army selling for private gain the supplies which stood between their soldiers and starvation. In what you have done I confess to realizing nothing but incredible courage and self-sacrifice, possibly misdirected. But the result has been to leave you alone, as I stand alone in a different sense, so placing a bond between us. There is no one in my world to whom I could give the trust I offer

you. Offer merely: I have done for you no more than you did in warning me against Dancla to-day, and you owe me nothing. You are absolutely free; will you cast your fortune with me, or shall I set you down in some one of the European ports at which we shall touch?"

Allard bent forward to lay his hand in the one so frankly extended. He remembered Stanief's name now, and remembering, comprehended many things.

"I have no one, nothing," he answered earnestly. "The purpose for which I gave all is accomplished and laid aside. Your Royal Highness, if you will let me serve you, take your purpose for my goal, your life for my empty existence, I will give you all I can."

Stanief's firm clasp closed.

"Agreed. *Soit que soit.*"

And Allard repeated the promise as seriously:

"Be what may."

The whistle of a passing tug, laboring through the mists toward Haverstraw with its

train of scows, drew the corresponding blare of the yacht's siren. Involuntarily Allard started, his over-strained nerves shrinking. Stanief smiled.

"Let Rome howl, John, I may call you John, since we commenced so? Indeed I must, after giving you that name in public. You are mine now, and all America can not take you. Rest so far; it is one of our old sayings at home: 'A Stanief guards his own!'"

His own! The long loneliness snatched the phrase greedily; worn out, Allard submitted to protection without resentment. A student of men, Stanief's eyes smiled behind their lashes as he continued more lightly:

"But now for details. You take the place of my secretary, whom I dismissed this afternoon and saw on board a train for Albany, very much against his will and very badly frightened. I have ordered his rooms prepared for you. His things are there, and I imagine you will probably find some of them you can use until your

own arrive in the morning. I will send Petro to you; his ideas are confined to doing as he is told, and I shall tell him that my invitation left you no time for packing. Of course you will resume your own name."

Allard drew back aghast as such a proposition.

"My own name—"

"Why not?" Stanief demanded. "Could anything be more safe? Masquerades are always dangerous and to be avoided. John Allard's unquestioned history, his journey abroad from which he reappears as my secretary, defy all investigation, where an assumed name and past could only arouse doubt. If you were challenged now as the escaped prisoner, your safest course would be to give indignantly your own name, proving it by your Californian connections and by me. John Allard has stepped back upon his stage. Write to your brother, if you choose; pick up your old friendships. The last three years simply do not exist for you; knot the past

and the future together and let the marred strand go."

The logic was unanswerable; with a quivering breath Allard took back all he had resigned for ever.

"You are right," he yielded, and bent his head to hide what flashed on his lashes.

Stanief touched the bell and rose.

"You are tired, and I have much to arrange. No doubt," the dark eyes were amusedly expressive, "Monsieur Allard is familiar enough with yachting not to be bored to-morrow. You will find Vasili a cheerful companion, Rosal also. Marzio, show monsieur his rooms and send me Petro. And tell Captain Delsar that I shall have pleasure in receiving him. Good night, John."

"Good night, your Royal Highness," was Allard's reply, but his straight eloquent glance carried its message to the other's heart.

Alone at last in the coquettish suite set apart for him—the jewel-box luxury of the yacht here manifested in azure and silver daintiness—the

great reaction seized Allard. So few hours since, he was Leroy; it was hard to grasp this reality. He was weary to exhaustion, but something very near fever drove him to the round window which swung back at his touch and let the wet sweet air rush in. Leaning there, the very chaos of his thoughts left physical torpor.

Petro aroused him an hour later—and still with that curious passivity Allard allowed himself to be cared for, measured, respectfully consulted. He even found himself ordering the old dishes for breakfast, specifying the old hour of service. And with the once familiar comfort came more restfulness.

Much later he came a second time to the round window and opened it to the rain and darkness. The April wind passed chill fingers among the boyish curls still warm from the bath, the tiny cold drops sprinkled the throat from which the departed Dancla's silken dressing-gown fell back, but Allard felt nothing. And suddenly his head sank on his arm.

"Desmond," he breathed, "I can forgive you, now. Can you hear out there, Desmond?"

The yacht slipped on through the mist, monotonously, steadily.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW DAY

THE morning sunlight penetrated the room riotously, merrily defying the azure silk and lace muffling the windows, glinting in every polished surface and running golden-footed from point to point. Lying tranquilly among his pillows, Allard watched the man busied in folding and laying away a multitudinous array of garments, placing gloves and handkerchiefs in drawers and arranging toilet articles.

"You are not Petro," Allard remarked finally.

The man started and turned.

"No, monsieur. With monsieur's permission, I am Vladimir. His Royal Highness said that as monsieur had not yet engaged a valet for the voyage, perhaps I might be accepted. I would be very glad to serve monsieur."

"Very well," Allard assented. Stanief was not to be contradicted, but certainly embarrassment

seemed unavoidable in view of an absent wardrobe. Dancla had been of a decidedly different figure from his successor. "What time is it?"

"Nearly ten o'clock, monsieur," and he approached and kissed the hand outside the coverlet before the surprised American could object. "Every thanks, monsieur; I am monsieur's devoted servant. It pleases monsieur to rise?"

"I—suppose so. The yacht has stopped."

"Yes, monsieur. We are anchored before the great city, New York, since many hours."

Allard had yet to learn his Stanief; the time was to come, when to know an affair in his charge was to abandon anxiety concerning it. The question of the wardrobe was embarrassing only from its overwhelming answer. Never even in the other days had Allard, naturally simple in tastes, provided himself with the lavish and sybaritic completeness he found awaiting him now. No detail was forgotten; the very toilet-table bore its shining array, each dainty article carrying the correct monogram, J. L. A. Marveling, Allard

pictured what it meant to have produced this in one night; and vaguely realized that there must be a deeper object than mere consideration for his comfort, behind all this unnecessary elaboration.

Breakfast was served in his own miniature salon.

"His Royal Highness is awake?" he inquired.

"Monsieur, his Royal Highness went ashore an hour ago, to pay farewell visits of ceremony."

They were to sail soon, then. Allard's pulses quickened with relief at the prospect. Remembering Stanief's expressive injunction to show himself at ease and make friends with his new companions, he resolved to go on deck. But before the white and silver writing-desk he lingered wistfully.

"You can mail a letter for me, Vladimir?"

"Certainly, monsieur."

The letter must be convincing, and not dangerous in the wrong hands. With a tenderness that was almost pain he recalled the last signed letter to his brother, written on that final night at

home, while Robert sat by with hidden eyes. A letter he had headed South America, the date blank, to be used as explanation to Theodora and her mother if the crash came and he disappeared for years.

The thick cream-tinted paper was convincing in itself, bearing in gilt letters the name of the yacht, *Nadeja*.

My Dear Old Robert:

I have just returned from the South, and of course intended to come straight home. But I met H. R. H. the Grand Duke Feodor Stanief, who has been visiting the United States, and he is taking me with him as his secretary. I owe him more than I can tell, or you guess, Bertie; and this service is a service of love. I will write again; you know there was no opportunity where I have been.

Give my love to Aunt Rose and Theo—is she quite my sister by this time?

Very happily and lovingly, my brother,

Your brother,

John Allard.

Like a girl he touched the letter to his lips before putting it in the envelop. Robert would watch the eastern newspapers, he knew, and couple the two stories together.

The lower Hudson was swept by a strong salt wind when Allard reached the deck, green and white waves running under the bright sunshine and lashed to swirling froth by the innumerable boats plowing back and forth. On the yacht everything was activity and preparation, all sound overborne by the crash of loading coal. The busy Captain Delsar left his affairs and came to greet the guest punctiliously, if hurriedly.

"We sail this morning," he explained, "and you will understand all that involves for me, monsieur."

Allard responded cordially; it was so wonderful, so beautiful, just to meet other men again and be himself. And presently Lieutenant Vasili came to add his cheerful greeting and lead the way to the forward deck, where wicker chairs

and small tables stood under a gay scarlet awning.

"His Royal Highness told me this morning to amuse you, if I could," he declared. "Indeed, I think he left me behind for that purpose, Monsieur John."

"Allard," the other corrected pleasantly. "I am infinitely obliged to his Royal Highness, then, I am sure."

"A thousand pardons; I misunderstood your name last night."

"Not exactly, his Royal Highness calls me John, my Christian name."

Vasili's eyes opened and he regarded his companion with marked respect.

"He told me he had known you a long time," he assented, "and that you had been ill. The voyage across will tone you up—if you are a good sailor—before we reach home."

"I am a good sailor," Allard affirmed, rather astonished at Stanief's account of his health. He had no idea of the extreme delicacy of his own

appearance, of how those years of torture had left him worn and colorless.

Vasili tilted his chair against the rail and smiled engagingly.

"For my part I am always happiest at sea," he confided. "Not that I am concerned with political affairs—*pas si bête;* I leave that for wiser heads. But still one is never secure in a country like ours. I walk straight ahead without asking questions, and hope the Grand Duke sees I am doing no more; nevertheless, one is more comfortable at sea. Ah, this America is a restful place! No intrigues, no rivals, no salt-mines in the background."

"A delightful picture you are painting for me," suggested Allard laughingly.

"Oh, you are the friend of his Royal Highness, monsieur. Moreover, every one believes an American or an Englishman when he declares himself with one party; it is only each other whom we always suspect. *Tiens,* the little white boat!"

The little white boat in question was one of the city police launches, and Allard's hand closed sharply on the arm of his chair as the officer in charge hailed the yacht, signifying his intention of coming on board. Captain Delsar went down to receive the visitors, not without visible impatience at the interruption.

"Come," exclaimed the diverted Vasili, after watching the colloquy for a few moments, during which several of the yacht's officers joined their chief. "If it is droll!"

"What is it?"

"Why, of course we all speak French—as does every one at home except peasants—but since Dancla went only the Grand Duke is left who speaks English. And evidently our guests have no French."

Allard surveyed the group, and glanced up at the gorgeous flag fluttering in the breeze and casting its shadow over him. Foreign ground, Stanief had called this.

"I might play interpreter," he offered slowly.

"Surely! Am I dull not to think of that? Shall we go?"

The mutually exasperated group paused to look at the pair coming down the deck toward them, Vasili in his gold-laced uniform and the gentleman in yachting flannels.

"Monsieur Allard, if you will indeed assist us!" welcomed the captain gratefully. "Consider that we sail in an hour, and the moments are going. His Royal Highness does not accept an excuse instead of a result."

"Delighted," Allard responded, nodding an acknowledgment of the sergeant's equally relieved salute. "Officer, can I translate for you? His Royal Highness is not on board, but I am his secretary—"

Oh, Stanief was very thorough! The cards Vladimir had presented were waiting for their owner to use on the occasion.

"You are very kind, Mr. Allard," said the deferential officer, reading the square of pasteboard. "You see, we received a telephone call

from up the river at Peekskill, asking us to get a better description of the clothes that were stolen by an escaping convict. They've picked up a coat, but it looks rather different from what would be expected. In fact, there was a man inside of it; but he says he lost his hat in the wind, and they haven't yet got the prison people to identify him."

It was so long since Allard had really laughed that he startled himself, but the humor of the situation was too much.

"I think you want to see the Grand Duke's valet," he explained, and translated for the others.

Petro was hurriedly sent for, and the fuming captain left the affair in charge of the two young men.

"Poor wretch; hope he gives them a run," commented Vasili. "Last year, at home, I had to ride second-class on a crowded train. In the compartment was just such a case as this man's, —convict being taken back to a fortress. We

rode ten miles, twenty; suddenly he spoke to me as naturally as possible. 'You know what I'm going to; give me a cigar,' he said, just like that. I gave his guards a ruble, gave him a cigar, and went on reading my *Figaro*. Before we reached the next station, just over a deep ravine, he flung himself right through the door and down. Always felt glad I gave him the cigar."

There was a curious unreality in the scene for one of the actors, as he leaned listening against the rail in the warm April sunshine, Vasili chatting gaily by his side and the imperturbable policeman opposite. But he answered the little lieutenant's last sentence with a very sympathetic glance of comprehension.

Petro appeared presently, and Allard gravely repeated a description of the famous rain coat, giving the name of the English firm that had made it.

"Thank you, sir," said the satisfied officer, snapping shut his note-book. "Much obliged.

You've no objection if your name gets to the papers, sir?"

Allard thought of Robert.

"Why, no, none at all. But I have done nothing."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"And now?" queried Vasili. "Shall we go back and chat, or first go over the yacht? Unless you know it already, of course; I forget you are an old friend of his Royal Highness."

"Let us go over the yacht, if you will," Allard evaded, not at all certain of what Stanief might please to assert. He sighed relievedly, hearing the puff of the launch below. "We can rest afterward."

Vasili contemplated him reflectively, inwardly deciding that Stanief's American must have been very ill indeed to be so easily tired. But he led the way below, charmed with the new companionship, and they wandered together over the costly floating toy.

They ended in the general salon, and Allard's

long-starved eyes went eagerly to the magazines and newspapers littering the table.

"Pleasant place," assented Vasili to the expression, dropping into an easy-chair. "And you will usually find some of us here. Of course, Count Rosal is ashore now with the Grand Duke, but he will be enchanted to learn that you are going with us. These voyages nearly kill him with ennui. He likes fast horses and fast motor-cars, and the Théâtre Français."

"Then why does he come?" Allard inquired interestedly.

"Why? There is a question! Because he is the Grand Duke's aide, because he wants to win favor with the man who will rule the country by the time we reach it."

"Why, the Emperor—"

Vasili raised one eyebrow significantly.

"Of course, if you do not want to talk," in slightly injured tones. "But every one knows that the Emperor is dying."

Allard summoned his recollections of affairs

European, doubtfully allowing for the gap of more than two years.

"The Grand Duke Feodor is the Emperor's nephew, not his son," he objected.

"Oh, he will only be regent, certainly," was the dry reply. "Never mind; I told you I understood nothing of politics."

Allard opened his lips to avow equal ignorance, then closed them. He had no idea of the rôle Stanief designed for him, or of what he was supposed to know. He moved to the table, instead of answering, and let his gaze devour the topmost paper of the pile. Vasili watched him, deeply impressed by the reticence and a little anxious as to his own frankness. When Allard again turned to him, the lieutenant welcomed the amity with relief and joyously accepted the suggestion of return to the deck.

The morning wore on quietly. The preparations for sailing were completed; the yacht poised restlessly like a snowy bird on the point of flight. Allard no less quivered with the rest-

less desire for departure, the thirst for the peace which would come with absolute security. Lying in his chair, regarding the teeming river shut in on either side by the two great cities and feeling all alike hostile toward him, he clung almost superstitiously to the phrase of the night before:

"A Stanief guards his own."

And not all content with bare liberty, he treasured the being no longer an outlaw; he had learned the old primitive ache of the "masterless man."

Near noon a tiny boat darted from shore. The captain hurried to the head of the miniature stairway; Vasili uttered a hasty excuse and also went in that direction. Allard hesitated, in some doubt before this new etiquette, then judged by the others' attitude and remained where he was.

As Stanief stepped on the deck, another gorgeous flag rose majestically into place and unfolded its emblazoned notice of his presence. His drowsy black eyes swept over the scene comprehensively, then he gave a brief order to the

captain and crossed directly to Allard. And Allard, rising to receive him, suddenly felt his heart quicken with a strange, familiar violence. "We Allards love more than other people," Robert had said. This was what he was giving Stanief, he realized with something like dismay,—that passion of fierce un-English intensity which considered nothing and made him its plaything. He had not meant to care like that again—

"Good morning, John," said the cool, faintly imperious voice; the warmly dark eyes met his.

Sighing, Allard yielded up the last resistance and gave his all.

"Your Royal Highness—" he murmured, and hated himself for the unsteadiness of his tone.

Stanief sank into a chair and waved him to the one opposite.

"We are going to sail at once," he announced. "We will watch our progress out of the harbor and then have lunch. You have passed an agreeable morning?"

"Yes—no," answered Allard incoherently,

taken by surprise. "That is, everything is right now."

Interpreting for himself, Stanief smiled.

"Tell me about it," he suggested.

The ringing of anchor chains ceased, the little launch again swung in its davits. The yacht shuddered, moved. Vasili came up and saluted rigidly.

"I have the honor to report that we sail."

Stanief rested his dark head against the chair-back and met the brilliant gray eyes with the sweet serenity of his own.

CHAPTER VI

"THE KING IS DEAD—LONG LIVE THE KING"

THE ennuied Count Rosal lunched with them,—a sallow, fatigued young patrician who wore a pince-nez. He obviously was much pleased by the American, and inquired anxiously whether he ever motored. Receiving an affirmative reply, he invited him, with an actual approach to enthusiasm, to try a new French car as soon as they landed.

Allard accepted willingly, even gaily; a little of his color had revived with the ocean wind, some fine elixir had mounted through his veins as the yacht drew from the arms of the harbor and danced out over the long Atlantic swell.

After luncheon Stanief dismissed the third member of their party with that nonchalant grace of his.

"Did you write any letters this morning?" he

asked, when the salon had settled into its usual repose.

"One; to my brother."

"Good; every one writes letters—an excellent thing to do. I gave your name to an avid-eyed band of reporters, as one of those sailing with me. You will be a person of some importance in the tangled affairs to which I am taking you; it is just as well to prepare."

"I have no desire to be curious," Allard began tentatively.

"But you naturally would like to know what is happening. Indeed, it is necessary that you know." He paused an instant. "Do you recall what I said to you last night of my country, of its intrigue and wrong and lack of faith?"

"Yes."

The shadows deepened across the fine dark face. Watching Stanief, it seemed to Allard as if the rose-hued salon lost a little of its brightness also, as if both man and room remembered hours not happy.

"All my life I have walked in the shadow of one man's hate," Stanief said quietly. "I have known it watching greedily for my least indiscretion, heard its wild-beast breathing as it crouched beside me in the dark, stepped cautiously to avoid the snares it spread for me. Unable to touch me openly unless I myself stooped from inherited safety, my enemy has employed every secret artifice to lure me into reach, every petty goad to sting me to a moment's forgetfulness. I never have taken a friend, conscious that one would be forced to betrayal if not already planning it. I learned long ago that the bright-eyed, fragile ladies of the court were not for me to trust. Living in the center of a dazzling pageant, the focus of a dazzling hate, I have had just one hope to carry with me. Not a pleasant hope, but it is about to be fulfilled. My enemy is dying."

"The Emperor—"

"Exactly."

Allard remained silent, understanding Vasili

better now. Stanief rose and walked to the window, gazing out over the tumbling field of water. When he returned it was with a touch of scarlet burning in his clear cheek.

"Before I started on this voyage, taken at his command," he said, "I bade farewell to my imperial uncle. Ill, grimly and helplessly conscious of the ultimate end, he looked up from his pillows at me. 'Your day is coming,' he declared. 'I know how long your regency will last, how completely my son will be left your toy and victim. But I shall wait on the threshold of the next world, Feodor Stanief, until you come and I see your punishment. Now go.' It was the confession of failure, the laying down of the cards, the first frankness between us."

The two men looked at each other.

"I am probably Regent now," Stanief added.

Allard's eyes did not leave the other's; no doubt clouded the unwavering confidence of his regard.

" 'A Stanief guards his own'," he quoted. "If

I were the little prince, I should have no fear, monseigneur."

Stanief lifted his head, the sunlight flashed back to the room before his expression.

"Thank you," he answered proudly. "And from emperor to peasant I could find no one else to grant me so much."

"But— I do not understand."

"Then you have not read our history."

Allard turned to the gates of memory, and gazing down dim vistas at many a vague crime and ambitious treachery, remained silent.

"My cousin Adrian," Stanief resumed, after a moment in which he also looked across the past, "by this time perhaps my Emperor Adrian is fourteen years old. Not until he is seventeen can he be crowned and take the government in his own grasp; that is, the country is absolutely ruled by me for the next three years. By me; but those years will be a splendid warfare, a struggle muffled in cloth-of-gold, a ceaseless vigil beside which my old life was peace. The

country is divided into two great parties: those who wish me to take the crown, and from whom I must protect Adrian; those who wish to rid themselves of me and govern as they choose through the child-emperor. Remember that neither faction believes I shall ever permit my cousin to take the Empire from me. Loyalty, honor, justice,—those are pretty, extinct phrases of chivalry to their minds."

Allard made a movement of protest.

"Surely not so bad, surely not nowadays," he objected incredulously.

"Our country is still medieval," Stanief retorted. "I tell you not one-half the fact. But, I make no pose of virtue and perhaps I am merely obstinately resolved not to do what is expected of me, but I *will* carry this through and crown my cousin on his seventeenth birthday, if I live."

His voice hardened into steel, his velvet eyes flashed through their curtaining lashes. Allard rose impulsively and held out his hand.

"'*Soit que soit*,' we said last night," he cried. "Let me aid; stand or fall."

"A desperate cause," warned Stanief, keeping the hand in his firm clasp. "For day and night my enemies will pour their poison into Adrian's ears; Adrian, whose father must already have taught him distrust and dread of me. It may very well be that when I resign the absolute power to the young Emperor, he himself will first use it to crush me."

"Impossible! And if it be so, at least we shall have fought the good fight."

"Then open the lists to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. We will live our own way for these three years, and abide the decision."

There was no question of etiquette between the two who stood together, with laughter glancing across the surface of an earnestness too deep for speech. Allard had no way of divining that the Stanief he knew did not exist for any one else; that the reserve of a lifetime was broken in their friendship.

They sat down again, presently.

"Long ago, when Adrian was very much younger, I used to see him more intimately," Stanief mused rather sadly. "Then I never considered a regency, believing the Emperor would live until his son could take his place. I was weary even then of the constant strife and suspicion; I longed to make a friend of my small cousin and some day find calm under his rule. But the Emperor interfered, and we have seen each other only formally since. Now comes your part, John. I shall place you in Adrian's suite as his personal attendant. I want you to do what I can not; to guard him from hour to hour, as far as possible, from my self-styled friends and his enemies. He will like you,—you have that gift."

"Gift?" Allard puzzled.

"The gift of being liked. And being an American, you will escape much of the jealousy which would attach to one who could demand more. It is absolutely necessary for me to have

some one near my cousin whom I can trust implicitly."

"I will do anything you wish," he answered simply. "Your purpose—let me serve it also. Only I will have to ask you to teach me a bit; I am afraid my ideas of the most formal court in Europe—"

"I shall teach you nothing whatever," Stanief declared, with his sudden smile. "Let the imperial Adrian have that amusement. Do not forget what I have implied to those you meet here: that you are merely my secretary as a whim, and are in reality my friend. You understand?"

Allard did understand,—the elaborate luxury with which he had been surrounded, the deference of even Count Rosal, the caution of Vasili.

"I would rather stay with you than be a child's plaything," he said wistfully. "But it is all right."

Stanief regarded him for an instant, then reached for a cigarette.

"You will be with me. But if you have any

idea that Adrian is like a child, wait," he observed dryly. "And now let us enjoy the voyage, since it is our last quiet period for several years."

Before Allard could reply, an agitated knock fell on the door and Marzio admitted the pale and breathless Rosal.

"Well?" Stanief questioned, instinctively rising.

Allard rose with him, and standing they received the message.

"I regret to report, by wireless from New York, the death of his Imperial Majesty the Emperor, at noon to-day."

A brief hush, then Rosal again in nervous conclusion:

"His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Adrian requests the return of your Royal Highness to the capital."

CHAPTER VII

ALLEGIANCE

"CHECK. You are losing your game, my John."

Allard laughed in frank admission,—a tanned, bright-eyed Allard after the long voyage.

"I am stupid to-night, monseigneur. It is difficult to sit here and play chess when we are anchored at last before our goal, the city of excitements. One has the feeling that one should go ashore at once."

"When one arrives in a port near midnight, one does not arrive officially until next morning. Since my first act must be to go direct to the palace, you will comprehend that the hour is unfortunate."

"Yes. Although every one must know."

"Certainly. The approach of the *Nadeja* was undoubtedly signified to the Emperor hours

ago. Play, play; to-morrow will come without our aid."

Allard moved a piece at random.

"I am not the only one impatient," he defended. "Count Rosal and Vasili spent the evening hanging over the rail toward the lights of the city, and telling me all we would do, from seeing Mademoiselle Liline dance to trying that new automobile. They went to bed at last from sheer exasperation."

"They do not have to stay awake to amuse his Royal Highness."

"Oh, I could not sleep, monseigneur. But I play bad chess."

Stanief shot a glance at him; perhaps he himself could have confessed a similar inability, if he had chosen, in spite of his indolent impassivity.

"You assuredly do," he agreed. "Checkmate. Set up the board again and avenge yourself."

The lap of the calm water against the ship's side marked the rising of the tide; the roar and

hum of the huge city came strangely after ocean silences. On the river's bank a girl was singing a minor, half-Gipsy air which penetrated at intervals, almost as if with timidity, into the rose-and-gold salon. Allard gathered his straying thoughts together and compelled his attention to the game. They are changing the watch on deck, he reflected absently; he heard the movement and agitation.

For any one to disturb Stanief unsummoned was rare; for the door to be opened like this, without permission, was unprecedented. But Marzio offered no excuse as he held aside the heavy portière. Stanief lifted his eyes languidly, then sprang to his feet with an abruptness that sent the chessmen rattling over the floor. Allard, startled, rose also and turned, to draw back mechanically into the shadow and leave host and guest face to face. Marzio dropped the curtain, closing the door softly as he went out.

The slight, rather frail boy clad in deep mourning was not unlike Stanief himself in fine,

dark beauty of feature, and there was a composed stateliness worthy of both in the gesture with which he extended his small hand in greeting. Stanief moved forward without a word, and, kneeling, bent his head to the slim fingers for which the one great jewel seemed too heavy. Still on his knee, in constraint of their difference in height, he received the young Emperor's formal embrace.

"I am glad you have returned, cousin," the boy said, with a grave dignity of speech corresponding to his bearing. "To-morrow—I wished to see you before then."

Stanief looked into the eyes on a level with his own, before rising.

"I shall hold this visit always in my heart, sire," he answered, his tone infinitely gentle. "I have not been given many such pleasant memories."

"It is a long time since we saw each other; you did not come to me—"

"That was never my fault, sire."

"No," he conceded calmly. "I knew it was not, although they told me so."

"I am grateful for so much justice. Permit me—"

Adrian took the arm-chair which the other advanced, and himself indicated a seat very near for his cousin. He had, of course, seen Allard on entering, but, accustomed to the constant presence of others, lent no further attention to the gentleman who remained standing at the shadowed end of the salon. On Stanief his large, intent eyes were fixed with an imperiously eager scrutiny.

"You are the same as always, as you were last winter," he declared slowly. "Dalmorov has insisted that I would find you very different, now."

"The Baron Dalmorov is more than kind," Stanief replied, betrayed into his unusual frown. "May I ask why I should have changed?"

"Because you are Regent, and you govern all."

"I beg pardon, sire; if I am Regent, you are none the less Emperor."

Over the young face swept an expression that so altered, so hardened it, that it was as if another and dual self came into view.

"Then I rule *you*, as my father did," he flashed.

Allard gasped in his corner; was this the child of fourteen whom he had expected to amuse? And not as to a child was given the difficult answer by the one who knew him.

"Yes, sire," Stanief returned steadily. "But—"

"But! You say but?"

"May I speak frankly? You will find many people to flatter you, to tell you facile, surface truths; let me for once tell exactly my meaning. Assuredly you do rule me and your country, so far as the possibilities permit. Yet you are surrounded by those who hate me, and even you, sire, who would joyfully see us both fall if they might mount upon the ruins. Many times I may see what is hidden from you, and I must act accordingly. Sire, it is my intention to hold

this seething Empire of yours in my grasp, to force it to bend or break in its stubborn wilfulness, until three years from now I give it back to you a tranquil government. But—and for this I said 'but'—if necessary, I shall act against your will, as against all other forces, until I carry my purpose to its end and have you crowned on your seventeenth birthday."

He drew a swift breath, caught by his own vehemence, his eyes never leaving the unchildish ones opposite.

"And on the day of your coronation, sire," he concluded, with a touch of sadness, "you will rule without the *but*. Call me to account then; I assure you I shall have no friends to protest."

Allard's own heart quickened at the fire of determination in the other's low voice. If only it had been a man who met that splendid frankness, he mourned furiously, not a child, a sullen child. For Adrian did not move at all, or answer the daring declaration. His head averted, he looked down at the floor.

Stanief waited a little, and the light died out of his face.

"You do not understand me, sire," he said, very quietly. "Or, understanding, you do not pardon one who serves you even against your will. I am thirty-two years old; it is my comfort to believe that when you reach my age, when jealousy and anger have passed away and perhaps taken me with them, that you will think differently of Feodor Stanief. Will you allow me to order some refreshment brought?" he added.

Adrian moved then, and the color rushed over his cheeks as he struck one small open palm on the arm of his chair.

"I understand you," he cried passionately. "Oh, I understand! Can I trust you? It is that, Feodor. No one speaks his thoughts to me; every one *lies*. The Emperor told me that many times before he died. 'Do not trust your cousin,' he whispered to me on the last day. 'Then I must trust Dalmorov?' I asked. 'No,'

he said, 'no; better Feodor than him. Trust no one.' And now you ask it of me."

"Yet you came here to-night, sire," Stanief reminded him.

"Because I must trust some one. Because I know Dalmorov and his falseness, while I do not know you, cousin."

"Then I ask you only to suspend judgment until you do, sire. A regent there must be, I, or another if I die—"

"I would rather have you than any one else in the world."

"There is no one—I speak knowing our court—no one else whose pride and honor so compel him to loyalty. And I stand in grievous need of your protection, my imperial cousin."

Adrian's head lifted haughtily.

"Of my protection! You, now?"

"I, now. Through you, if you lend your name to their use, my enemies can make the task I have set myself difficult beyond description."

The kindling fire had caught, at last; with

the first boyish impulsiveness of the interview Adrian's response flashed to meet the appeal.

"You need not fear that! You need not fear me."

"Thank you, sire," Stanief answered, simply and gravely.

There was a pause. Allard wondered, as he discreetly observed the two, just what would have been the result if Stanief had brought less convincing seriousness to answer his cousin's sensitive pride and incredulity.

"I have come alone," Adrian mused, with a half-sigh, "with Gregor. He does what I wish because he knows Dalmorov hates him and he is afraid to stand alone. So when I bade him bring me here secretly to-night, after I had presumably retired, he obeyed. I like to be obeyed." The expression of several moments before returned transiently.

A playfully earnest warning of the other cousin's recurred to the listener; it appeared that both had "the habit of domination."

"And so I must return at once, or they may discover I have gone. But I am glad I came, cousin; it seems easier now."

"Sire," Stanief said, and somehow his tone made Allard feel suddenly abashed, as one who stands before a thing not for his eyes, "there will come a day when you will stand in the great cathedral to receive the oaths of allegiance of your nobles. There will be all ceremony, all solemnity, but—take mine now. The one I shall give you then can mean no more. You have been taught to have no faith in such promises; when you receive mine for the second time, I hope it will have gained some value in your sight."

"I wish it had now; I almost think it has," he answered, with a bitterness and energy singularly strange from his boyish lips. "I want to have faith in you, cousin."

He rose, and Stanief with him.

"I care for nothing," he added, reverting to the previous invitation. "I have already stayed

too long. Monsieur," his eyes went to Allard for the first time, "monsieur is the American gentleman who sailed with you from New York?"

Allard came forward in response to a glance from Stanief.

"Sire, I have the honor to present Monsieur John Allard, whom I have persuaded to come with me because I also have need of one friend whom I can trust."

He was after all so pathetic in his lonely and sophisticated youth, this child. Saluting him, Allard's clear gray eyes involuntarily expressed all their sympathy and warm kindliness. And, meeting the regard, Adrian gave him his only smile of the evening.

"It is easy to trust you others, Monsieur Allard," he said wistfully. "I wish you were my friend instead of Feodor's."

"Is it not the same thing, sire?" Allard questioned.

"Is it?"

"I sincerely believe so, sire."

"Bring Monsieur Allard with you to-morrow, cousin," Adrian directed, lifting his gaze to Stanief. "And good night."

"You will allow me to accompany your return, sire?"

"Certainly not,—to attract all the capital!"

"Pardon, I meant as secretly as Gregor attends you; who—again pardon me—is scarcely attendance enough."

Adrian shook his head decisively.

"Your people on the yacht—"

"They are not already aware that your Imperial Majesty is here?"

"You can order them to be silent," he retorted, with angry irritation.

"Exactly, sire," said Stanief, and waited.

Adrian was nothing if not swift of thought; he drew the inference intended and conceded the point.

"Very well," he yielded. "As you will, cousin. Good night, Monsieur Allard."

He held out his hand, and quite unconsciously

Allard took the little fingers in his warm clasp. Stanief, holding aside the curtain, smiled to himself; but Adrian accepted the Americanism equably and his last glance was all friendly.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Stanief reëntered the *Nadeja's* salon. Allard was still there, and rose expectantly to receive him.

"I waited," he explained.

"You need not have," Stanief replied, with all his usual cool serenity. "Go and rest; to-morrow the battle opens. Only—"

"Only, monseigneur?"

He came over to the table to find the tiny gold-tipped cigarettes.

"Only it was not with you I played chess to-night, John, but with Dalmorov and the late Emperor, my uncle. And I claim check."

CHAPTER VIII

TO MEET THE EMPEROR

THERE are some periods which offer to the backward glance of memory rather a blur of blended color than a distinct picture, a rich and shining tapestry in which no one thread can be distinguished. So always to Allard seemed that first week in the country he learned to call home. The stately ceremonies of Stanief's reception and assumption of the regency; the dazzle and pageantry of the court even when thus subdued by mourning; his own sudden importance as the favorite of the actual sovereign, all merged into a glittering confusion through which he moved automatically.

But there were two incidents which detached themselves from the bright background and always remained with him. The first was the first morning when Stanief formally met the

Emperor at the palace; and, as he had stooped to the salute, Adrian had deliberately given him an embrace so markedly affectionate that even Allard felt the significant thrill that ran through the room. And then, even while the unusual color still flushed Stanief's dark cheek, Adrian shot a glance at a sharp-faced man opposite, a glance so sneering, so bitterly triumphant, that the straightforward American actually shrank from the revelation of dual thought. Evidently the embrace was given less to please Stanief than to annoy this other. Seeing the man's rigidly held face beneath the ordeal, he knew without question that this was the Baron Dalmorov whose desire in life was to prevent this very friendship between the cousins.

Never again did Allard make the mistake of measuring Adrian by his few years.

The second event was near the end of the week,—one noon when Stanief came home from a visit to the palace and found Allard alone.

"Do you remember the trust you offered to

take for me?" he asked abruptly. And, without waiting an assent, "You are summoned to it already."

"Monseigneur?"

"The Emperor this morning asked me to add you to his household. It is more than I hoped to gain, that he should himself make the request; yet—"

They looked at each other, Allard startled and half dismayed, Stanief's velvet eyes less tranquil than usual.

"Yet I shall miss you, John," he concluded, his voice a caress.

The regret and the tone lay unforgotten in the closed room of Allard's heart. Years after, he could turn and find them there.

So from the gorgeous household of the Regent one man passed to the still more gorgeous palace. Vasili and Count Rosal regarded him with respectful envy; he was elected to membership of the two clubs of the capital's *jeunesse dorée*, and overwhelmed with friends and invitations.

But the Emperor was not at all inclined to let his new companion remain away from him very much, and Allard was quite as willing to stay at what he privately considered the post of duty. So it happened that he went riding with Adrian more frequently than he went motoring with Rosal, and accepted readily a routine which left him few hours unoccupied.

It was not possible to live at the palace without learning many things. But it required just one day for Allard to learn enough of Adrian to make him smile at ever having thought Stanief imperious. The desire for absolute dominion and power over those near him was the most obvious characteristic of this descendant of a hundred autocrats. Moreover, he tolerated no contradiction, no evasion of a resolve.

"You are not rich in your own right, Monsieur Allard?" he said one day, with his mature directness and self-possession.

They were strolling up and down a terrace overlooking the river, and Allard involuntarily

paused in surprise and with no slight embarrassment.

"No longer, sire," he admitted, truth coming as the one course.

"My cousin,—you served him as his secretary?"

"Yes, sire."

Adrian sat down on a broad marble seat under the trees, lifting his head with the movement usually to be translated as a signal of danger.

"You serve me at present, not the Regent. As one of my household, you will accept from me in future."

"Pardon me, sire—"

"I will have it so, monsieur. You must be all mine, all. I shall speak to Feodor. Why do you object? You do, then, consider yourself his, not mine?"

"Sire, you misinterpret; I am assuredly of your service."

"Then you accept?"

Allard met the flashing gaze helplessly; it

was the other Adrian, distrustful, jealous, haughty, whom he faced and to whom he yielded.

"It is as you wish, sire, of course. I thank you."

"You do not," he retorted shrewdly, although his brow relaxed. "Why did you resist?"

Again Allard took refuge in the simple truth, a little sadly.

"We Americans, sire, are not accustomed to serve, I am afraid. We would stand alone. If I could accept the Grand Duke Feodor's protection without such reluctance, it was because of old reasons and old love."

"For him?"

"Yes, sire."

"Do you know Dalmorov secretly urges to me your love for Feodor as a cause for dismissing you?"

"I had not known it, although I might have guessed. But you could not believe me, sire, if I told you I did not love him."

"No; you are very easy to read. And I know

more: I know that Feodor is glad to have you near me, although he is fond of keeping you with himself. Why?"

Allard regarded his keen young inquisitor candidly.

"Because—I use his own phrase, sire—because I am the only one that he feels he can wholly trust."

Adrian's eyes opened, then he laughed outright and the sinister personality faded altogether from his expression.

"You tell me that yourself, Monsieur Allard? Oh, if Dalmorov could hear you! Never mind; perhaps Feodor is deceiving you, perhaps you are both sincere, but certainly you yourself are all truthful. His turn also comes to-day, my cousin's."

"I do not understand—"

"It is not necessary. I am going to receive him here, this morning. After he arrives, pray stay at the other end of the terrace and let no one pass to disturb us."

This daily visit of the Regent had become a matter of course. Sometimes it found Adrian surrounded by many people, sometimes alone, more often with Allard, as now. And never was he so sweetly gracious to Stanief as in Dalmorov's presence; although, as Stanief knew perfectly well, at other times he listened without rebuke to the baron's constant insinuations and warnings. If the young Emperor had confidence in no one, most assuredly no one could risk a judgment of his real thoughts. Only one sentiment he took no care to conceal: for whatever reason, he liked the regular visit and would suffer nothing to prevent it.

However puzzled by the last suggestion, Allard could only comply with the request and retire as Stanief came down the steps a moment later. And Stanief, seeing Adrian waiting alone, left his aide at the head of the terrace and alone came to him. So, Vasili at one end of the grassy ledge, Allard at the other, the cousins were for once unobserved.

Adrian's expression was unusually animated as Stanief bent over his hand.

"Do you know why I wished to see you out here in quietness, cousin?" he demanded.

"I am afraid not, sire," Stanief confessed, smiling.

"Then sit down here," he touched the bench on which he himself was seated, "and I will tell you."

Stanief obeyed, and Adrian surveyed his stately kinsman with earnest, though doubting intentness.

"That night on the *Nadeja*," he at last said, "when you told me that I governed, 'but'—were you in earnest? It amused me to tell Dalmorov —not all you said or when you said it, of course —yet some of that. I told him you had promised to do as I wished, and he insisted that you played with me. Were you in earnest, I wonder?"

"Absolutely in earnest," Stanief answered, too well trained in self-mastery to betray his

irritation at being discussed with his rival in the game of the future.

"'But'—" Adrian repeated, and sat silent for an instant. "Were you ever in love with a woman, cousin?"

The question was so unexpected that Stanief started and replied almost at random:

"No, sire."

"Dalmorov says that you were, long ago."

"Dalmorov," the other began, then checked himself, his tone chilling. "The incident to which Baron Dalmorov doubtless refers, sire, hardly answers your question. Ten years ago, when I was less than twenty-two, I was briefly attracted toward a lady of the court. The affair died in its birth, on my discovering that mademoiselle was acting as the paid spy of the Emperor, your father. Since then I have thought of more important matters."

Adrian leaned back, his slim fingers twisted together.

"That was the Countess Sophia Mirkoff," he

supplemented calmly, "whose husband you pardoned from the Two Saints last month; Dalmorov informed me. Was that because you still care?"

"No; because I would not have her imagine I remember enough for prejudice," Stanief answered, with glacial indifference.

The approving fire shot across the boy's lowered eyes, his pride sprang to comprehension of the other's.

"I am glad it is so," he said sedately. "I have been arranging your marriage, cousin."

If the terrace had crumbled beneath them, Stanief could have been no more astounded than at this.

"I beg your pardon!" he gasped.

"Why not? It is my privilege," Adrian returned, not moving.

Stanief opened his lips, and closed them again. The green and gold garden, the blue river and white city spread below, swam in a dazzle of color. He had never been more deeply an-

noyed, or more furiously angry with Dalmorov. But habitual self-control again aided him.

"I have no desire to marry, or time to give to such a distraction at present, sire," he answered.

"You would have to marry sooner or later, cousin."

"Then permit it to be later. After your coronation, if you still insist."

Adrian's small mouth set in a firm line rivaling the Regent's own.

"I wish it now. I have arranged that you shall marry the Princess Iría of Spain."

"Sire, forgive me if I presume to remind your Imperial Majesty that I have the right of questioning an order so personal."

The steel-hard anger of Stanief's voice struck fire from the flint of Adrian's determination.

"So I rule you!" he flashed tempestuously. "So you meant your pretty phrases! Dalmorov was right, right. You played with me, and I will never pardon you, Feodor Stanief."

Stanief drew back, realizing all the trap prepared for him.

"You are severe, sire," he retorted with dignity. "Perhaps reflection upon how unexpected this is, upon how serious to me is the amusement which to you signifies nothing, may win your indulgence. My life is full to overflowing; there is no place in it for a wife."

"You refuse?"

Stanief bit his lip.

"No, sire; I protest."

Adrian stood up, and the other perforce rose with him.

"You yourself said it," the boy stated, his chest heaving with passion. "Now, the test. I have the right; you know it. Do you govern me, or I you?"

"Sire—"

"You or I?"

Stanief looked very steadily into the blazing young eyes, himself colorless with the restraint forced upon his own emotions.

"I believed there were two promises given on the *Nadeja*, sire," he answered, never so quietly. "It seems that only one is to be remembered and that Baron Dalmorov wins. But I make no complaint; I suppose your last question was hardly serious."

"You consent?"

"I obey," he corrected pointedly.

At once victorious, and dominated by his kinsman's bearing, Adrian flung himself on the seat and motioned the other to the place beside him. But Stanief remained standing, choosing not to see the invitation, and there was a pause.

"I do remember my promise," Adrian declared, proudly reverting to the reproach of a few moments before. "If I have made you do this, cousin, it was not to please Dalmorov."

Stanief bowed, answering nothing.

"The lady—you will have heard of her. I met her last year on the Riviera. In her country they call her the Gentle Princess, because—she is. And she is very lovely."

Still the dark face was unstirred. His object gained, Adrian fretted and chafed before the change he himself had wrought.

"You are like Monsieur Allard; you do not want to yield your will," he said, half petulantly, half haughtily. "He is mine, you gave him to me; yet he did not like it because I said that no longer shall his fortune come from any one but me. Why?"

"He is an American, sire."

"Why does that make a difference between you and me?"

"I love him, sire."

The cold explanation coincided perfectly with Allard's; illogically Adrian felt a pang of isolation before this friendship, although he would not have believed either if they had professed the same affection for him.

"The churches are ringing the hour," he remarked, the sullen child struggling with the Emperor. "If you wish to go, as usual, you have my leave."

"Thank you, sire; my hours are indeed crowded."

"You are willing to ask the Princess Iría in marriage?"

"As you dispose, sire."

Satisfied and dissatisfied, Adrian held out his hand.

"You are not content, cousin," he accused. "You think me unkind."

Stanief paused to meet the wilful gaze.

"Perhaps I think of a day the years are bringing, sire," he replied gravely, and bent his head still lower to the jeweled fingers which grasped so much.

Adrian flushed scarlet.

"No," he denied fiercely. "Feodor, you can not believe I will fail you if you do not me? You can not think that then, after that—"

Stanief did not help him at all. Taking refuge in wordlessness, Adrian left the sentence unfinished and let his cousin go, with an assumption of dignity that hardly concealed the sting

of the rebuke he had received. But he did not offer to relinquish the purpose so distasteful to Stanief.

For half an hour the terrace remained hushed and silent under the noon sunshine, the tree-shadows wavering back and forth across the small, motionless figure.

"Monsieur Allard!" at last the summons rang.

Allard returned serenely, of course ignorant of the recent stormy discussion.

"In a few months," Adrian stated, without looking at him, "the Princess Iría de Bourbon will come here to be married to the Regent. I wish you to be one of the escort that will meet her and bring her to the capital."

"But, sire—"

"You are surprised?"

"I did not know the Grand Duke contemplated marriage, sire," Allard explained, stunned.

"He did not; it is I who contemplated it. You will go?"

"Surely there will be many more fitted for such

an honor. Of course it will be as you arrange, sire; but I would rather stay here."

Adrian moved, sighing; his lip took a softer curve and for the first time he almost looked his few years. "If you like her, monsieur, Feodor will like her. I want you to see her, to tell him good of her. She is different from any one else—when we were both in Italy we saw each other every day, and I know. She is so gentle; I want her here."

Allard gazed at him in utter wonder.

"Feodor believes I force the marriage to annoy him and please Dalmorov. It is not so; it is because I want Iría here. You understand that?"

"I am trying, sire."

Adrian stood up decisively.

"Let us go in. When the time comes, you shall go with her escort."

CHAPTER IX

GUINEVERE OF THE SOUTH

IT was quite a month after that sunny noon on the Emperor's terrace, that Maria Luisa Iría de Bourbon was informed of her betrothal to the Grand Duke Feodor Stanief. She also received the announcement on a garden terrace, by a caprice of chance; but it was a terrace of the South, starred and flowered all over with violets, heavily-sweet tuberoses and blue Florentine irises. Moreover, it was sunset, and she stood a slender white figure against the rosy sky.

"It is all decided?" she asked in a hushed, pathetic little voice, a voice shattered into crystalline fragments, like the dash of a clear brook against a rock. "It is sure to happen, señora?"

"Quite sure," answered her mother, with a firmness not unsuggestive of Adrian.

The princess made a move forward, then swayed like one of her wind-blown irises and

slipped down to the old moss-green steps. When in her own room they revived her, she turned to hide her face among the pillows.

"I am afraid," she whispered under her breath. "I am afraid."

That was all. She had been taught obedience in a convent, and the Duquesa her mother was not to be resisted. One does not stop the mills of the gods by laying a flower across their wheels.

But if Stanief seized every delay of diplomacy and ceremony in his Northern court, he was unconsciously aided by every feminine subterfuge from the Gentle Princess in her sun-kissed home. The elaborate trousseau required weeks to prepare, the autumn storms made the voyage by sea unpleasant, and the journey by land was too fatiguing and informal. Between one and another, it was six months after the announcement before the escort ship anchored in the cobalt-blue bay which makes a dimple in the curving cheek of southern Spain. And then Iría met some of her new countrymen.

Not easy were their names and titles to her lisping Latin tongue, as she greeted the guests graciously and gracefully, her mother by her side. But as one gentleman was presented, she leaned forward with delicate surprise.

"Monsieur John Allard," she echoed, her large golden-brown eyes on his face. "Monsieur is not then of my future country?"

"Madame, I am an American," he explained, almost with the tenderness one involuntarily shows a child. It seemed to him that he had never seen anything more appealing than her young dignity and pathetic beauty of expression.

Iría regarded him earnestly. His right arm hung in a scarf, but he bore the injury with a bright unconcern that suggested it rather a badge of honor than an embarrassment. Although so simply announced, his companions waited for him to pass on with deferential patience and lack of surprise at her interest. Very suddenly the young girl flushed, her golden-brown head drooping on its white stem.

"I am most glad to have met monsieur," she murmured confusedly.

After that the preparations for the departure went on more rapidly. Contrary to all expectations, the princess was not too weary to sail next day and embarked with her mother and their ladies without too obvious regret.

The chief of the escort, the venerable Admiral Count Donoseff, was charmed and flattered by the interest shown in his staff by their future mistress. The first lady of the Empire Iría would be, until Adrian's distant marriage; her friendship might be valuable.

"Monsieur Allard has then injured his arm?" she remarked, on the third day of the voyage.

"Madame, in an act of devotion most remarkable," the admiral replied. "Imagine that a week before we sailed, an insane student made an attack upon the Emperor. His Imperial Majesty was driving, with Monsieur Allard seated opposite, when the criminal leaped on the step of the carriage and attempted to plunge a knife into

the Emperor's heart. Monsieur Allard flung himself forward and caught the blow on his own arm, undoubtedly saving the Emperor's life at the expense of a dangerous wound to himself. Drenched with blood, he held the assassin's wrist until aid arrived."

Iría shuddered, yet listened thirstily.

"I heard—a little of this," she said breathlessly. "But I thought it was his Royal Highness the Regent who was hurt."

The Admiral blushed at his own forgetfulness; a courtier should never forget.

"Certainly; he also, madame," he hastened to assure. "He was beside the Emperor and so at a disadvantage, but he sprang to aid Monsieur Allard in holding the man and received a slight wound in disarming him. All Europe rang with the story, and Monsieur Allard was decorated with the Grand Star of the Order of St. Rurik. The justice of the Regent is swift; the criminal was tried and executed the next day."

Iría glanced down the deck to where Allard

chatted with two young nobles of the court, the sun striking across his bright hair and laughing face.

"The Regent," she began shyly, then relapsed into silence with her ready change of color.

But a little later she caught Allard's eye and summoned him by a scarcely perceptible movement of her hand. He came with pleasure and saluted her with that direct friendliness of regard which had carried him safely past many a shoal and undercurrent during his continental life.

"The Count Donoseff has been telling me the history of your wounded arm, monsieur," she said. "Let me add my poor admiration to all you receive, realizing that you saved the Emperor, soon to be my sovereign also."

"You are too gracious, madame," Allard protested lightly. Gaiety came very easily to him since that day when he had saved Adrian's life and Stanief's honor. It seemed to him that John Allard had not only paid; he had re-

earned the right to existence, justified his liberty.

"If all the world knows of it—"

"Oh, pardon; I only meant to say that the Grand Duke was present and did as much as I."

Something in the words brought her soft smile.

"Is not the Grand Duke usually where you are, monsieur?" she queried.

"I am with him whenever he and my service of the Emperor permit, madame."

"Only then?" she doubted.

Surprised, he shrugged his shoulders laughingly.

"Some one has been telling tales of me, Princess. I confess I am with him more than is strictly warranted."

"I have heard so much of his coldness, his severity," she ventured, her lashes sweeping her round young cheeks. "He, he cares for nothing, no one, they say."

"Oh, no, madame," Allard denied, warmly enlisted in the defense. "That is most unjust. Con-

sider only those from whom such reports come; there is no one living who has more undeserved enemies. I know him capable of love; I have seen it, felt it, lived it. And he works, madame; how he works! The country under his rule gains new life, new hope. Madame, if I might presume, I would implore you to believe nothing of him except what he himself will show you."

She crimsoned before his fervor, but her delicate face expressed no anger at the daring.

"I will not," she assented, still with that strange timidity. "I was frightened at first, but not now, not any more. The Regent is fair, with gray eyes, is he not, monsieur?"

"No, madame; he is very dark," he assured her hastily, his thoughts on Stanief's much-loved face.

Iría smiled, bending her head still lower.

"He is perhaps—fanciful, monsieur? He might do something quite useless and romantic, just for a caprice?"

"Hardly, madame. I think he does nothing

without a purpose. He—I believe he has not been very happy, Princess."

"And, is he now?" she asked faintly.

Allard recalled himself to gallantry with charming grace.

"Madame, he should be happier than any one living."

"Thank you, monsieur," she breathed, and let him retire presently, her bosom heaving under its white linen and lace.

It was a very pale and listless girl who had first met Stanief's envoys, but as the voyage proceeded she grew each day more rose-tinted, more daintily radiant and content. One would have said the salt winds blew across some Elysian garden, some fountain of Ponce de Leon, and brought health with their touch. She had a little way of suddenly blushing and smiling, as if at some delightful secret of her own not to be carelessly spoken.

On the last day at sea she chose Allard's arm for her daily promenade up and down the deck.

This honor was eagerly desired by the gentlemen, old and young alike, but she had hitherto shown a decided preference for the veteran admiral; or one of her ladies, if the sea were sufficiently calm. Allard no longer wore the scarf, but she had paused before him demurely.

"Your arm is better, monsieur?"

"Madame, it is quite well."

"Then, if you do not fear to injure it—"

And with that they were pacing dignifiedly down the shining deck, under a score of envious eyes.

"To-morrow we arrive, monsieur."

"In a happy hour for our country and the Grand Duke Feodor, madame."

"He thinks so?"

"Princess, can you doubt it?" evaded Allard, who himself had many doubts, remembering Stanief's grim sarcasms on the subject of being given the care of a twenty-year-old girl when his life was already one of crowded tasks and serious peril.

Some trouble in his manner communicated itself to the small hand fluttering on his sleeve.

"I do not want to doubt," she said. "I do not. Monsieur, in that old English legend—have you ever thought how wise King Arthur would have been, if instead of sending Lancelot to Lady Guinevere in his place, he had himself gone to meet her in Lancelot's guise?"

"Why, I never did think," Allard acknowledged merrily. "But certainly he would have been much wiser, madame."

He regarded her in bright question which drew the answer of her flush.

"Do not modern King Arthurs ever choose the wiser course?" she faltered.

"Perhaps they are too busy and hampered, madame, as the ancient king may have been also. Since I have lived at a court I have altered my ideas on such subjects. I never saw any one who worked so hard as the Regent. He has set himself a splendid task, and splendidly he carries it on."

Iría's expression clouded slightly; the glance she stole at her companion was puzzled and full of dawning terror.

"Yet he might leave it a little while, monsieur."

"Madame, to leave it for one day might topple down the careful building of months. Moreover, he holds the city always under his grasp, fearing danger to the Emperor."

Her left hand went to her heart.

"Monsieur, we arrive to-morrow; it would not be kind to play with me."

Allard met her pleading eyes with candid amazement.

"Princess, what have I said? *I* venture to play with your Royal Highness!"

"Then the Grand Duke is waiting over there?" she flung out her hand toward the north, lifting her small white face to him, the golden-brown curls tossing in the breeze.

Even then he had no conception of her mistake.

"Surely, madame; where else?" he wondered.

The Gentle Princess made no exclamation, no reproach. Only her head drooped again, and shivering she drew the veil about her face.

"I am tired, monsieur," she gasped. "Will you take me back?"

"Madame, most unintentionally I have offended you. Let me beg forgiveness and ask how."

"No, no; no one has done wrong. I myself was—absurd. I am not angry, monsieur; only tired."

They walked back, Allard completely bewildered and uncomprehending. By her chair Iría paused and gave him her hand with a smile whose sweetness was beyond tears.

"Thank you, Monsieur Allard," she said. "Perhaps we shall still be friends over there. You are going home, but I go a stranger to a strange place; I meant no more than that."

She was like Theodora, Allard thought, deeply moved. Surely Stanief would be gentle with her gentleness.

The next morning they landed.

CHAPTER X

A STANIEF'S OWN

IT was a pity that amidst all the gorgeous ceremony and confusion of welcome, Iría did not see the warm affection of Stanief's greeting to Allard. Perhaps she would have been less hopelessly afraid when the little Emperor took her hand and presented to her the tall, superb noble whose dark face, finely emotionless, resembled a cameo, whose velvet eyes she dared not seek behind their curtaining lashes.

Yet Stanief was faultlessly courteous, even kind in his grave manner. It might have been merely that he was so different from her fancies of the last weeks.

The wedding was to take place in two days; two days of festivities, of marvelously decorated streets, of wonderful balls by night. Iría did exactly as she was told; yielded dazedly to Adrian's

caresses and accepted the Regent's lavish gifts. Like a beautiful toy she allowed her ladies to dress her half a dozen times a day, and listened submissively to her mother's advice. But the afternoon before her wedding-day, she saw Stanief alone for the first time.

After all, it was not really alone. The Emperor had been chatting with her on the great glass-enclosed balcony, and as Stanief came toward them, he rose with a significant smile and went back to the reception-hall. Still, from that crowded reception-hall they were only separated by arching, open arcades; only slightly screened by towering palms and flowers in huge vases.

Stanief took the chair beside his fiancée and looked at her; this was the first moment when he could do so without feeling himself watched by all curious eyes. He had read perfectly the terror under her mute passivity, the shrinking of her tiny frost-cold hand from his touch, and he pitied her with all his heart. Now, in the lustrous rose-pink gown against which her transparent

skin showed without a tinge of color, her bronze-bright head averted, her mouth curved in childish pathos, she inspired him with an anger against Adrian which he had never felt for himself.

"Princess," he said gently, "we have seen so little of each other until now, nor shall we again until after to-morrow. May I say something which has been in my thoughts since we met yesterday?"

"As you will, monseigneur," she murmured.

"I think it is as you will," Stanief corrected, smiling in spite of himself. "But I accept the permission. Will you forgive me if I have imagined that you feared me, Princess?"

Iría raised her topaz eyes to his in complete dismay.

"Monseigneur, you are angry—"

The sentence broke; those firm, steadily tranquil eyes of his caught and held hers.

"Angry? Why? But I am sorry, deeply sorry, for the net of policy which has enmeshed us

both and left me no power of freeing you. And I would do all possible, Princess, to make this less hard for you. There is no need to be afraid of me in any way. I do not know what they have told you of me; if I govern the Empire severely, it is that order may come from chaos, no more. Of what else I may be accused—"

"Monseigneur!"

He smiled again at her tone, rather sadly.

"Oh, I know my enemies. But such things have no place between you and me. John Allard was of your suite; perhaps he could have told you that I am not all harshness."

She snatched her gaze from his and blushed as he had never seen a woman blush before, the heavy crimson staining her very forehead.

"He did tell me—that, monseigneur."

"Then I would ask you to trust me, Princess. To-morrow you will come to my house; there will be no other change in your life which you do not wish. I am not a reigning sovereign, there is no reason why you should not keep with you the

ladies of your own country whom you prefer. If you desire, I will have the Emperor ask your mother to remain with you for a few months."

Iría shook her head. Her mother's constant surveillance threatened even the peace Stanief offered, and prohibited rest.

"You are good to me, monseigneur," she faltered. "I will stay with you, please."

He understood, knowing the lady in question.

"Thank you," he answered, and after a moment, "A Stanief guards his own; so much, at least, our race has of loyalty. And to guard you all I can, that is all I claim. There are enough more serious troubles, Princess, without adding the artificial one of fear. If there is sorrow to you in this marriage, it is beyond my cure; but rest quietly in my guardianship."

The shadow of a sob crossed Iría's sensitive face; she looked up at him bravely and gratefully.

"You are good," she said hurriedly. "I never hoped you would be like this to me, monseigneur.

No one ever thought of me so carefully before, never. But it is right to tell you, *because* you are so good. I know that you did not wish this marriage, either, we are alike so. Baron Dalmorov informed me this morning."

"I am infinitely indebted to Baron Dalmorov," observed Stanief, his dark brows contracting in an expression that might have terrified into flight Iría's new-found confidence, if she had not been absorbed in her confession.

"I was not hurt, monseigneur; it made it easier to know. And now I can tell you; I, I hate secrets. There was some one—oh, some one quite impossible and who does not care for me at all. He does not dream I ever thought, like that. But I fancied he was some one else—I misunderstood. It was not his fault in any way. I had to tell you, monseigneur; it seemed to me right to do so."

Stanief leaned forward and laid his hand over the cold hands folded in her lap. He had never before believed that a woman could be frank,

never imaged one who "hated secrets." It was as if he stood on the threshold of a room all perfume and whiteness; and not the most accomplished coquette could have devised a means of moving him so profoundly.

"All my life I shall remember that you gave me your confidence, Iría," he answered, with exquisite delicacy and respect. "So far I am happier than you; I love no one. Have no doubt, no dread of anything I can save you. Some good may come of all this, how can we tell? And at least there is no need of making it worse by not understanding. You will not shrink so much from to-morrow, now?"

She met his eyes, helpless as a child in the great reaction; his warm clasp seemed to melt the chill despair of the last days, a little color came back to her cheek and something flashed rainbow-like upon her lashes.

"Not now," she sighed quiveringly. "Thank you, monseigneur."

Stanief raised her hand to his lips, and pres-

ently they went back to the Duquesa. After which he went in search of Adrian.

The Emperor was talking to Allard when his cousin came up to the alcove where they were ensconced, and he sat motionless with astonishment at sight of Stanief's steel-hard glance and compressed lips.

"Cousin?" he exclaimed, daunted in spite of himself.

Allard had risen at the approach, but Stanief did not regard him and Adrian gave no permission to retire.

"Sire," Stanief said, in the markedly quiet tone that came with his rare anger, "it is frequently your Imperial Majesty's pleasure to submit me and my affairs to the discussion or criticism of Baron Dalmorov. I have made no complaint, I make none now, but there is a limit to such endurance. The lady who is to be my wife—"

Allard moved involuntarily; Adrian raised his hand in swift protest.

"Cousin, I assure you—"

Stanief saluted him formally.

"Sire, I have just learned that Baron Dalmorov has had the tact to inform the Princess Iría that I was marrying her under compulsion and against my will. This insult to madame, this falsehood—"

"Cousin!"

"This falsehood, sire—since, having met the Princess, it is my earnest desire to have the honor of her hand—this is too much. Baron Dalmorov is your attendant; I request your justice. If it is refused—"

"Well, cousin?" Adrian asked mechanically, rather in stupor than challenge at Stanief's words.

Stanief's usually veiled glance glinted clear and ice-cold.

"Sire, Dalmorov shall account to me now; and I to you later."

Allard, familiar with both, bit his lip in an agony of anxiety. For an instant Adrian wa-

vered, then his eyes fell, beaten down by those of his kinsman.

"Whatever you wish," he conceded, docilely as Iría could have spoken. "He had no right, no excuse from me. Go bid Dalmorov come here, Allard."

The surrender was complete. Relieved and surprised, Allard obeyed, hazarding a guess that the Emperor's own fondness for Iría had influenced the answer.

But Adrian had not lived ten months with his Regent without learning more than a childish love of command. He looked up again at the stately figure that towered over him, glittering in the semibarbaric magnificence of dress demanded by etiquette.

"Come by me, Feodor," he urged, with a gesture of invitation to the chair at his side.

"Thank you, sire," without moving.

Adrian surveyed him, then stooped to the first apology of his life, however imperiously spoken.

"I never told any one at all of your unwilling-

ness to marry Iría, Feodor. If it is known, it is because you yourself seized every possible delay. Come here; I do not wish Dalmorov to find you standing there."

Stanief complied, and Adrian laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Then you love Iría, after all?" he asked, with hesitating curiosity.

"Love? In twenty-four hours? Hardly, sire; but I guard my own."

The young Emperor lifted his head no less proudly.

"And so do I, cousin. Dalmorov shall satisfy you."

Half an hour after Iría had returned to the suite appointed to her and her mother, she received a visit from Baron Dalmorov—a very different Dalmorov from the malicious, self-confident gentleman of the morning, and who offered her so abject an apology for his mistaken and untrue statement regarding the Grand Duke's attitude, that the Gentle Princess was quite dis-

tressed. She sent him away reassured and apparently grateful, then fell to connecting events. Recollecting Stanief's expression during her naïve account and the carriage of his head as he had crossed the reception-hall to Adrian, she had no difficulty in divining the reason for Dalmorov's sudden contrition. But Stanief's strength no longer chilled her with terror; instead she stood with relief behind its shelter.

There was a ball at the palace that night. Stanief never danced, but every one else did, and the Emperor opened the evening with the Princess. It was obvious to all why Stanief had been forced to this marriage, whenever Adrian was seen with Iría; the boy so evidently liked, indeed, loved her. And the fifteen-year-old autocrat was always popularly supposed to be without affection.

Near the end of the evening Stanief came across Allard, who was leaning against a flower-wreathed pillar and watching the dancers with grave, unseeing eyes. The other man studied

him for a minute, then laid a hand on his shoulder.

"John, I have scarcely seen you to-night. You look troubled."

Allard started and turned, his face brightening warmly.

"I am not dancing to-night, monseigneur," he explained. "That is all."

"Why not?"

The gray eyes fell.

"I was—a bit out of sorts, perhaps."

Stanief stood silent, his own expression becoming very somber. Allard waited quietly; he indeed bore the stamp of fatigue in his pallor and the dark circles beneath his eyes.

"It is a tangled skein, this life of ours," Stanief said at last, "and not wholly of our spinning. You are with the Emperor to-night?"

"Every night now, monseigneur."

"Then I may not see you until morning. Good night, John."

Allard smiled with the cordial brilliancy that

always sprang in response to his name on Stanief's lips.

"Good night, monseigneur," he answered lovingly.

The next morning, with all elaborate ceremony, the marriage took place. It was remarked that when the Princess stood up, in as much snowy satin, old lace and pearl as could be crowded upon one small feminine figure, opposite Stanief in the vast cathedral, her wide eyes never left his face, and she seemed to find support in his composure. And when they came down the aisle together, her little white-gloved fingers clung to the white sleeve of his uniform as if there alone she touched some reality in the bewildering panorama.

"Did you ever see the frail edelweiss growing on a ledge of some ice-fringed granite cliff?" whispered the volatile Vasili in Allard's ear. "Look, pray, at our Grand Duchess."

"The edelweiss is safe, at least," Allard replied soberly. "Perhaps safer than the cliff."

CHAPTER XI

IN THE REGENT'S STUDY

STANIEF was writing, writing steadily, placidly, his pen rustling faintly as it slipped across the paper. The ruddy glow of the open fire was tangled and reflected among the many-faceted knickknacks that littered the desk, caught and tossed back from a dozen shining surfaces, and mockingly echoed by deep-tinted walls and draperies. Most ruddily, most vividly, the light seemed to gather around the writer, as if its quivering pink radiance were a warning or a shield.

It was like another presence in the room, that fire, to the man behind the curtain. He watched it also as he crept stealthily forward, clutching more tightly the object in his hand. A man of the people, shabby, gaunt, unkempt, he stole out into the Regent's study, stepping cautiously on the gleaming floor or on the treacherously soft

rugs which slipped beneath his unaccustomed feet. From the velvet hangings he gained the shelter of a tall Vernis-Martin cabinet and crouched in the shadow, shaking from head to foot with nervous tremors.

Stanief worked on undisturbed; once he paused to choose another pen, and the intruder cowered to the floor in abject fear. But the writing was resumed without alarm. After a few moments the man again moved forward, this time on his hands and knees, until he reached the end of a high-sided leather couch. There he halted again. Coming here with a purpose so bold, the habit of a lifetime yet prompted him to hold his soiled garments away from the gilded and perfumed upholstery with a vague sense of apology.

There never was a clock that ticked so loudly, so insistently as the timepiece above the hearth, a clock that set its beats so exactly to the beat of a man's hurrying pulse. Once the man on the floor touched his chest curiously, as if to be quite certain whether it was his heart, or indeed the

swaying pendulum which sounded through the quiet place. Reassured, he moved on.

The glowing firelight wavered giddily across Stanief's bent head, seeking in vain for a hint of brown in the fine black hair, which had a slight ripple and a tendency to lie in tiny curls where it touched the neck. The man noted this dully. If one struck there? Or lower, between the broad shoulders—

Stanief leaned back and selected a cigarette from the tray on the writing-table. His drowsy lashes fell meditatively as he reached for a match, a half-smile curved his lips. The man by the chair darted forward and struck once, from behind.

The knife crashed ringing to the floor as Stanief's quicker movement met his assailant's. The man cried out sharply as the strong white hands closed on his wrists and the superior strength forced him to his knees beside the desk.

"Clumsily attempted," commented the level voice. "Have you any more weapons, *mon ami?*"

"Excellency, Royal Highness, pardon—I have no French."

Stanief shrugged his shoulders and lapsed into the language of the country.

"I asked you if you had other weapons, but it does not matter."

He deliberately transferred both captive wrists to the grasp of his right hand and with his left opened a drawer of the desk. The man made no effort to free himself. Generations of serfdom had reasserted themselves; he might have killed from behind, but before the patrician's glance and voice resistance did not even occur to him. He submitted passively when Stanief produced a pair of handcuffs and snapped them in place.

"Stand up, and farther off," came the contemptuous command. "I am not accustomed to doing my own police work. You need not try to escape; the guard is within call. I might have had you arrested half an hour ago when I first saw you."

"Royal Highness, how—why—"

Stanief answered the stupefied gaze, coldly amused.

"Because it interested me to watch your attempt. I keep a mirror on my desk, not being without experience. Who sent you to kill me?"

"Royal Highness, my brother was hung last week."

"As you this week. Well?"

The man winced.

"Royal Highness, we wanted freedom. They tell us that while your Royal Highness lives it can not be; the country is too firmly held and too content. So we strive to act in time."

He spoke as one reciting a lesson, monotonously, with effort. His type was familiar, lacking even the poor excuse of originality.

"Your brother was executed for an attempt to kill me?"

"Serenity, he worked in the palace kitchen and put poison in a cup of chocolate."

"I remember. He was tried; I had nothing to do with his case." He paused, considering; and

the other stared at him in mute fascination. "Before I ring to have you removed, have you anything to say?"

"Gracious Highness, pardon!"

Stanief regarded him with scornful amazement.

"Pardon? You are mad, *mon ami.* Do you fancy me a child or a woman to set you free after this performance? Why should I pardon you? You do not interest me in the least. Go face your trial; my share in the incident is ended," and Stanief turned away.

"Royal Highness, mercy—I am afraid! Not that—I will—"

"What?"

"Buy," he offered desperately. "Royalty, not to sell my comrades—who are we in your sight—there is some one else, some one of the court who wishes your death."

Stanief stopped with his finger on the bell and bent his keen eyes on the livid face. It was not a pleasant spectacle, this sordid, trembling

figure in the firelight, but an uglier specter loomed behind it.

"Go on, if you choose," he conceded. "You have my permission."

"Royal Highness, not my comrades. But he is not of us; he urges us here to fail and die. You are the master; Royal Highness, his name for grace."

"I promise you nothing. Certainly not your liberty."

"No, no, but life!" he made a movement to throw himself at the Regent's feet, but drew back before the decided negative. "Royal Highness, to live, only to live. He is a great lord, he goes to court; he hates and fears you. Royal Highness, he is the Baron Sergius Dalmorov."

"Ah," observed Stanief, and said nothing more for several minutes. His all given, the man waited feverishly, not daring to speak except by his imploring gaze. But Stanief finally pushed the button without vouching a reply.

"Dimitri," he said curtly to the officer who ap-

peared in answer to the summons, "take this man and have him imprisoned until I send for him again. Understand me; there is no charge against him at present; simply he is a prisoner at my pleasure."

The officer saluted in silence, however amazed at the presence in Stanief's study of one who certainly had not passed the door, and in silence marshaled his dazed captive backward to the threshold. There he halted and again saluted.

"Monsieur Allard awaits the honor of being received by your Royal Highness."

"Very well; admit Monsieur Allard."

"Highness," faltered the prisoner once more.

Dimitri favored him with a scandalized stare, jerked him unceremoniously out the door, and administered a shake that almost sent him into Allard's arms.

"More respect, animal," he ordered explosively. "Pig of a peasant! Oh, a thousand pardons, Monsieur Allard; pray enter."

Allard laughed and passed on, giving the pris-

oner a compassionate glance that altered to one of surprise and distrust at sight of his face. But he asked no questions, having learned many things in the course of his life in the Empire. Adrian himself had first given his favorite the dry advice to see nothing that did not concern him.

Stanief had resumed his writing; at Allard's entrance he looked up to nod pleasantly toward a chair, and continued his work without speaking. The two were accustomed to each other; smiling, Allard sat down and let his head sink against the high back of the cushioned seat.

The fire glowed and danced, rose and fell, making an artificial brightness that mocked the clouded sky without. Gradually, from waiting Allard drifted into reverie, in whose closing mists his surroundings were lost from sight.

After a while Stanief laid down the pen, pushed aside the completed task, and surveyed his companion unobserved. Twice the Regent moved as if to speak, then changed his intention and

remained mute. The expression that forced its way through his locked composure was not gentle; it was as if he struggled fiercely with some emotion and felt it wrench and writhe beneath the surface of self-control. But in spite of his will, his dark brows tangled, the black eyes glinted hard behind their deceptive lashes. And when he finally spoke, his voice carried a tone never before used to Allard.

"John, what is wrong?" he demanded.

The other looked up in surprise.

"Nothing, monseigneur," he answered, rather wearily.

Stanief's fingers closed sharply on one of the ivory toys which strewed the desk.

"That is not true," he contradicted. "Kindly say so if you do not wish to explain; I am not a child to be put off with a light word. Something has been wrong with you ever since your return from Spain."

Too assured of their friendship for resentment or to attribute the speech to anything ex-

cept interest in his affairs, Allard smiled even while changing color with pain.

"I have you always, monseigneur," he said. "If I have lost other loves, at least I can rest content with you."

The paper-knife snapped in Stanief's grasp.

"Thank you," he responded, with an accent worthy of his cousin. "I believe I asked you to explain."

The unconscious Allard pushed the bright hair from his forehead, his eyes on the ruddy unrest of the flames.

"Of course I meant to tell you some time, monseigneur," he mused aloud. "But it seemed a bit cowardly to burden you with my troubles; you could not help them, and you have so many of your own. It was no time to speak of such a thing during your wedding, and as the weeks went by it grew harder and harder to speak of it at all. I tried not to betray myself, but I am rather a bad actor. If it were only I who suffered. The journey to Spain, for madame—"

He paused. Stanief gazed at him with an expression as somberly dangerous as ever one of his dangerous house wore.

"The journey to Spain, monsieur?" he repeated.

Aroused at last to a strangeness in his manner, Allard turned to him in wonder.

"During the journey to Spain, monseigneur, this came for me," he replied simply, and drew forth a letter which he laid before the other.

Stanief picked it up, himself confronted by the unexpected. Allard resumed his seat and averted his head as the rustling paper unfolded.

It was a sweetly calm letter, a letter written by one in the evening of life and itself breathing an evening repose and gray twilight hush. Across the fevered passion of the man who read, the first words drifted like the cool, scented air of the Californian garden from which they came. A letter that neither reproached nor questioned, its message was given with all tenderness of phrase and household name.

Robert had not been well for a long time, Aunt Rose wrote most delicately. After John had left for South America so suddenly, his younger brother had fretted and chafed against his own quiet life. Even his engagement to Theodora had failed to cheer him, or cure his strange restlessness and abstraction. About six months after John's departure, he had been found unconscious on the veranda, lying among the crumpled newspapers. An illness followed, and after recovering from that he never seemed to grow quite strong. In the third year of John's absence, when preparations were being made for the long-delayed wedding, he again fell ill. The morning they received John's letter from the *Nadeja*, he rallied wonderfully. Asking to have the letter himself, he read it again and again, then sent them all away while he rested. An hour later they had found him, resting indeed, his cheek upon the letter and the old bright content on his boyish face. Theodora had borne it very well. They were tranquilly calm in their life together,

now, and sent their earnest love to John in the distant life he had chosen.

Stanief laid down the letter very gently. He never forgot how the light from this purer and simpler world fell across the labyrinth of dark thoughts at which he scarcely dared look back.

"Nearly two years," Allard said, his head still turned away. "So long since Robert died. I did not write at once from here; I thought they knew of me, and I wanted a little real life to tell. I was sick of pretense. I suppose the women did not know how to reach me here; Bertie would have had no difficulty. But it was a grief past remedying, and there seemed no use troubling you."

Stanief rose and came around the writing-table to lay both hands on the other's shoulders.

"I beg your pardon, John," he said earnestly and gravely. "I spoke to you just now as I never will again, come what may. I have my own griefs, less patiently endured than yours; and I misunderstood."

"I did not notice," Allard answered, with per-

fect truth. "You are always like no one else, monseigneur. I am glad that you know, very glad. You see, it is not only that I myself have lost Robert, but that I have taken him from Theodora. I wanted so much happiness for her, and now—it was all wrong. Let us talk of something else, please."

Stanief turned away to the table.

"My last cigarette was never lighted," he remarked, the change of tone complete. "Did you not see that particularly disagreeable fellow-countryman of mine who went out in Dimitri's charge? He tried to kill me just before you arrived."

Effectively distracted, Allard sat up.

"He—"

"Oh, that is nothing novel. In fact, it becomes monotonous. Only this fellow varied the routine by declaring Dalmorov the instigator of all this."

"Dalmorov!" Allard echoed incredulously. "To stoop so far! Yet I remember; I saw him

talking with your prisoner the other night. I was coming from the club with Rosal and Linovitch, when the acetylene search-lights of the car fell across the two, as they stood in an angle of the cathedral wall."

"So? He is imprudent. Also he should recollect that while such people will keep faith with one another, they will cheerfully betray one of the class they hate."

"You will accuse him, arrest him?"

"My dear John, on the word of a wretched peasant? I shall do nothing so impulsive. But, I will perfect the chain, and then—" He offered a match serenely. "Why should he not pay? Moreover, he is dangerous to the Emperor. When I resign this remodeled empire to my cousin, he shall rule it, not Dalmorov. Have patience yet a while. Before my power passes from me, I will remove this gentleman, whether Adrian approves of it or not; and then contentedly lay down my borrowed scepter."

"The Emperor—"

"The Emperor may do as he will, afterward. He is fond of his Dalmorov."

"I am not so sure of that, monseigneur; he plays with him."

Stanief smiled.

"My young cousin is a kitten for whom we are all toy mice, John. Which reminds me that the hour for my visit to him approaches."

"And recalls me to my errand. The Emperor requests that her Royal Highness the Grand Duchess will come to him this morning, if it will not derange her plans."

"You have told madame?"

"No, monseigneur. I thought perhaps you—" he looked at Stanief interrogatively.

"Would accompany her?" Stanief completed the question. "Perhaps."

He touched the bell, and the long regard in which he enveloped Allard held many blended emotions besides its affection.

"Has madame gone to drive, Dimitri?" he inquired of that attendant.

"Her Royal Highness at this moment descends the stairs, Royal Highness."

"Say to her that I would be glad to see her here, now, if she is at leisure."

Dimitri vanished hastily. An instant later he opened the door, and Iría came noiselessly across the threshold with the exotic, Andalusian grace that made her least movement a delight.

Both gentlemen rose at her entrance. Coloring faintly, she inclined her head to Allard, and crossed to Stanief, lifting her eyes to his with a certain delicate confidence and trust.

"You sent for me, monsiegneur?" she questioned, in her rippling southern voice.

"I asked you to come," he corrected. "Monsieur Allard has a message for you."

She turned docilely to Allard, without leaving Stanief's side.

"For me, monsieur?"

Stanief looked from one to the other. Very lovely was the young girl in her trailing blue velvets and furs; her golden-brown hair clus-

tering in full, soft waves under the large hat, her golden-brown eyes warm with expectation. Iría had acquired a dainty poise, not less gentle but more assured, during these months of emancipation and freedom under the Regent's protection. Allard gazed at her with frank admiration and friendliness as he explained:

"Madame, the Emperor requests the happiness of your presence this morning, if the visit will cause no disturbance of your plans."

Her dimpling smile responded to a demand sufficiently familiar. Adrian's love for her had long ago outlived surprise and become an accepted fact.

"Thank you, monsieur," she answered, and again looked up at Stanief. "You are going, monseigneur? We may go together?"

"I intended to ask it of you, if you will wait an instant for me to arrange these papers."

Allard saluted them quietly, and withdrew. Like all the rest of the city, he fancied them most happy in each other. The Regent's aversion to

the marriage had been forgotten in his bearing since the first day of his fiancée's arrival.

Iría sank down in an arm-chair and loosened the furs under her round white chin, laying the huge muff in her lap. Quite innocently and without shyness she followed Stanief's movements as he tossed into a drawer the writing upon which he had been engaged and dropped on top the thin, keen knife left from the recent conflict.

"Monseigneur," she said at last.

Stanief winced ever so slightly; there were times when the formal title fell like a drop of acid on his nerves.

"Madame la Duchesse?" he retorted.

Iría laughed out in her surprise, all unconscious of his meaning.

"Monseigneur, are you going to send Marya away from me?"

"I! What have I to do with your ladies? Keep or dismiss them as you choose, Iría."

"Marya cried this morning, telling me that last night the Baron Dalmorov warned her of

your intention. He said that the Emperor would object to the sister of Count Ormanof remaining at court, so you would dismiss her. But I told Marya that you knew how much I cared for her, and would explain that to the Emperor."

"Some day Dalmorov will learn discretion," Stanief commented, almost too indolently. "It is nearly time. The Emperor did speak to me of the Countess Marya, and I pointed out to him that her brother's misconduct did not affect the matter in the least; since we are not living in China and visiting faults upon entire families. Also I explained that you rule your own household."

"But you govern us all, monseigneur," said the Gentle Princess, most naturally. "I was sure it would be right somehow; I told Marya that no one who belonged to you need be afraid."

He paused abruptly in front of her.

"Then you are not sorry that you trusted me with yourself, Iría? You are not sorry any longer that chance placed you in my keeping?"

She leaned forward across the muff, her eyes suddenly wet in their sincerity.

"Oh, no," she denied with energy. "No, monseigneur. Ah, we do not call such things chance, we women of the South, but a higher name! I have never been sorry since that first day on the winter balcony when you spoke to me so wonderfully. You—you are so good, so kind, monseigneur."

Stanief looked into those clear eyes for a long moment, his own glance veiled. Then he gently took one of the little gloved hands and lifted it to his lips.

"I seem to have been born just for that," he said, the sadness of his voice masked by its even control, "to guard what is mine. I am glad if I do it passably well, Iría. I wish I could hope that my other ward would tell me as much, some day. Come, let us go to the Emperor."

She rose, softly flushed and smiling, yet vaguely troubled by his manner.

"The Emperor?" she ventured. "He is a

shadow, monseigneur! You are not satisfied with him?"

"What do you know of shadows, who are all sunshine? If I imagine a cloud on the imperial horizon, it is still no larger than that bit of lace in your hand. Also, the question is rather if he is satisfied with me, than if I am satisfied with him. Adrian is—Adrian."

Together they moved to the door.

CHAPTER XII

THE TURN IN THE ROAD

IT was a few weeks later, when the tardy spring was awaking reluctantly from its long sleep, that Stanief's cloud drew nearer and gained darker substance. Adrian's increasing restiveness took the form of active interference with the government, and not wisely. All that was possible Stanief was willing to yield, if he might keep peace, but finally the impossible was asked.

It was a question of taxes which made the first rift between the cousins, a question with which the young Emperor had nothing to do. The tax had been imposed during the period of readjustment; now, owing to the Regent's skilled government, it was no longer necessary and he proposed to remove it. To the amazement of all concerned, Adrian chose to object.

Plainly enough Stanief saw Dalmorov's influence behind the opposition, and saw himself bound to persistence both by policy and an implied promise to the people. Not as yet had the tax been removed, but he most courteously had reminded Adrian that no one possessed the power of interference with the measure. The result had been inevitable; Adrian sulked and the Regent's enemies furtively rejoiced.

So opened the last year of the regency. If on the first night of the first year Stanief had claimed check of his opponent, now, gazing across the half-cleared board, Dalmorov could return the cry.

Meanwhile the suite of the sullen young sovereign suffered much from his caprices; until finally Iría and Allard were the only two his caustic tongue spared and his ill humor passed by. They alone did not dread the honor of attending him. And at last he even contrived to give Allard the sting of many rewakened memories.

"Allard," he remarked one morning, "you never told me more than just that you were an American. From what state are you?"

They were alone together, two learned and exhausted professors having just taken leave of as trying a listener as could well be conceived. Across the book-strewn table Adrian contemplated the other, meditatively at ease.

"I am a Californian, sire," was the reply.

"Come show me where in this atlas, *pour s'amuser*. Your California is not small, if I recollect."

Allard came over obediently and found the map, pointing out the city remembered so well and so sadly.

"There, sire, near that little bay. Our place lay beyond the town; we called the house Sun-Kist."

"The house was near the bay?"

"Very near. We used to sail and fish there. Just here lay the yacht club, where Robert kept his motor-boat—" He broke off and turned

away more abruptly than strict etiquette allowed.

Adrian deliberately drew his pencil through the name on the map.

"Robert?" he queried.

"Robert Allard, sire, my younger brother. He died two years ago."

"Soon after you came here, then?"

"While I was on the *Nadeja*, sire, making the voyage."

"Have you no other relatives there?"

"Yes; my aunt, Mrs. Leslie, and my cousin, her daughter."

Adrian studied his companion's pallor with a certain scientific interest, idly scribbling on the margin of the atlas without regarding what he wrote.

"You regret your home?" he inquired.

Allard bit his lip to steady its quiver, fiercely unwilling to bare his old pain for the diversion of this coldly ennuied inquisitor.

"There is nothing to call me home, sire," he

replied. "My brother is not living, and my cousin, who was betrothed to him, has no wish or need of me. I think I never want to see the place as it is now. My life is here."

"You loved her," Adrian said calmly. "How much you give one another, you quiet, gray-eyed people! Do not look like that, Allard;" he actually smiled. "I am too used to my intricate and intriguing subjects to fail in reading your truthfulness. And I have not watched you with the ladies of the court without learning that some woman, one that you loved, sat at the door of your heart."

Allard wavered between exasperation and helpless dismay at the other's acuteness; there were occasions when his Imperial Majesty was almost uncanny. But he ended by remaining silent, as usual. Adrian at fourteen had been anything but a child; now, at sixteen, he was fairly matched with Stanief himself, and the lesser players stood back at a distance from the contest of wills. From those players Allard had

learned the wise habit of drawing aside to let the Emperor's moods sweep past.

"You and Iría," Adrian added, after a moment during which his thin, high-bred face hardened strangely and not happily, "you two at least are transparent, and free from underthoughts. What time is it?"

Allard glanced at his watch.

"Eleven o'clock, sire."

"You need not go when the Grand Duke arrives; I may want you afterward. Allard—"

"Sire?"

"I have been kind to you, if to no one else, I think. Kind, and constant. Perhaps I have guarded you from more pitfalls set by envy than you can conceive, or would credit. And you have served me, not Feodor or another. If you were forced to the choice now, would you follow the Regent or me?"

The question could not have been more unexpected or more difficult. Allard caught his breath, utterly at a loss. Deceive Adrian he

would not. To forsake Stanief even in appearance was not to be considered, and yet to exasperate the jealous and exacting Emperor still further against his cousin was bitterly unnecessary.

"Sire—"

"Go on."

But he could not go on, his ideas in hopeless confusion.

"I am waiting."

"Sire, the Regent," he admitted with desperate candor.

Adrian laid his pencil carefully on the map and closed the atlas, saying nothing at all. Allard flushed to the roots of his fair hair.

"Not that I am ungrateful," he protested in hot distress. "Not that I do not remember, do not understand all that you have done for me, sire. And against you I would serve no one, not even him. I would hold my life a slight thing to give either of you. Sire," he took a step forward, his ardent gaze seeking the other's com-

prehension, "before the brother I loved, the woman I love, before any call, I would follow the Regent. He— I have no words for it. It is not that my loyalty to your Majesty is less, but that he claims me against the world."

"Happy Feodor," said Adrian coolly. "Do not distress yourself, Allard; if you had told me anything else I should not have believed you. Why," he suddenly lifted to the amazed American a glance all cordial, "it is pleasant to find that loyalty to any one still exists, to find one rock in this shaking quagmire. Here is the Regent; go down the room and find a book to read until we finish."

Dazed, Allard mechanically obeyed so far as to move down the apartment and pick up a book. But keen anxiety for the friend he could not aid kept his attention on the interview that followed, although it was beyond his hearing.

Stanief crossed to his ward with the dignified formality never relaxed between them, and bent over the offered hand. No shade of expression

foretold the announcement both knew he was come to make, nor was Adrian on his part less impassive. The petulant boy of two years before had become a slim, self-contained youth, whose bearing, no less than his elaborate uniform, added much to his apparent age and height. If his dark young face did not resemble his cousin's except in feature, the difference was not in lack of equal firmness.

"Iría did not come to-day?" was the nonchalant greeting.

"No, sire. She was fatigued after last night's reception, and we did not understand your desire."

"Oh, I expressed none, except as it is always pleasant to see her. Madame was adorable last night, a very flower of her delicious South. It occurred to me that you yourself, cousin, did not appear to feel so well as usual."

"I was tired, sire," he replied simply.

Adrian frowned with some other emotion than anger, darting a swift regard at Stanief, who

leaned back in his chair with a listlessness rare indeed in him. The Regent also had changed in the last two years; one does not mold a chaotic, struggling mass of conflicting elements into a ball to match the scepter without paying a price. Yet if the habit of command had curved a little more firmly the firm lips, if deep thoughts and watchful diplomacy had darkened calmness to gravity, some other and subtler influences had brought a singular underlying gentleness to his expression and kept hardness at bay. Adrian turned away his head half-impatiently, and did not speak at once.

"You devote too close an attention to state affairs, cousin," he rejoined. "Next year we will relieve you of them."

The accent was more than the words; together they brought Stanief's color.

"I shall resign my charge most willingly, sire," he answered, with dignity.

"I am glad to hear it; I fancied you might miss the regal game and find life monotonous.

You have taken the task so completely from my hands that it causes no surprise to find you are wearied. I admit that you have spared me even the fatigue of consulting my wishes or opinions in regard to the government."

"The accusation is hardly just, sire. A suggestion of yours has never been disregarded nor has it failed of its serious effect."

"Ah?" drawled Adrian, with his most aggravating incredulity in the inflection.

Stanief raised his lashes and met the other's eyes steadfastly. Both comprehended the situation perfectly, comprehended the imminent break Adrian was forcing. And the Emperor did not soon forget the direct sorrow and reproach of that glance. But Stanief attempted no defense.

"Because," Adrian resumed, fixing his eyes on the table before him, "I have been told otherwise. I am rejoiced to learn the truth from you, cousin: especially as a rumor reached me this morning that a certain tax had been removed, against my wish. You doubtless know the meas-

ure of which I speak. I am glad to find it is not so."

"Pardon, sire; it is so," was the calm reply.

"The tax is removed?"

"Yes, sire."

The Adrian of two years before would have burst into furious passion; the one of to-day simply rose and walked to the nearest window. Stanief necessarily rose also, and stood by his chair, waiting. At the opposite end of the room Allard clenched his hands in helpless nervousness, forgetting to keep his pretense of reading. The low voices, the leisurely movements of the two, had not masked from him the crisis for the hopes and plans of years.

But Adrian made no scene. Probably no one realized less than the Regent himself how much the example of his own self-control had taught the same quality to his ward. When the young Emperor came back, only his extreme pallor betrayed the tempest within.

"Very well," he said resolutely. "Amuse

yourself, my cousin; I can wait. Eleven months, is it not?"

The break, and the menace. Stanief saluted him quietly.

"A trifle less than eleven months, sire. May I assume your Imperial Majesty's permission to retire? I suppose it is scarcely worth while to reiterate the arguments as to the necessity of my action."

"Scarcely. Do not let me detain you from your many affairs, cousin. Ah, I believe Dalmorov is waiting out there; let me tax your courtesy so far as to ask you to send him to me."

He extended his hand carelessly; no longer as a sign of friendliness, but as a compulsion of homage.

"It is for you to command, sire," was Stanief's proudly unmoved response.

Adrian looked down at the bent head and put out his left hand in rapid, curious gesture, almost as if to touch caressingly the heavy ripples of dark hair,—the merest abortive movement,



"Will you ride with me, Monseigneur?" Page 201

for the hand fell again at his side before even Allard saw.

"Thank you," he acknowledged composedly, and watched the other go.

Dalmorov entered presently, radiant with satisfaction, but Allard could have borne witness that the baron passed no pleasant hour with his irritable and irritating master. Like the fleck of a lash Adrian's tongue touched each weakness and stung each exposed hope of the courtier three times his age, until even the distrait American found himself compelled to amusement.

Stanief did not ride home that morning with the cheerful Vasili and bored Rosal, who awaited him. As he came down the wide steps between the usual parting, obsequious crowds, a girl leaned from a victoria that stood in the place of his own carriage,—Iría, opposite her the pale young Countess Marya.

"Will you ride with me, monseigneur?" invited the Gentle Princess, with her deliciously confiding glance and smile. "We were on the

promenade, and I thought perhaps you would have finished—"

A knot of early daffodils was tucked in her girdle, the spring breeze fluttered a bright strand of crinkled bronze against her brighter cheek; all the youth of the year was in the happy face she lifted to him. Stanief paused with his foot on the step to look at her, many thoughts meeting in his drowsily-brilliant eyes.

"Thank you," he answered. "I wonder if you will ever come for me again, Iría, after I have finished here indeed."

An innocent surprise and pleasure dawned in her expression.

"I will come every day, if you like, monseigneur," she offered. "I did not know you cared."

He took the seat beside her, with a courteous salute to Marya.

"You are gracious, as always. I did not mean exactly that, although you can not guess how pleasant it was to find you here to-day. Live your pretty routine and fancies, Duchess of

Dreams, and give me the alms of time you can not use."

They spoke in Iría's soft native tongue, which the Countess Marya did not understand and which Stanief had learned long before in some of the *Nadeja's* nomadic voyages. Always gentle to the gentle Iría, to-day his voice carried an added tenderness which stirred her to vague unrest and wistfulness.

"You do not mean that," she said, troubled. "How should I have any time that is not yours, monseigneur? And my fancies—you can not know how many of them are wishes that I might prove a little, only a little, of all your kindness makes me feel. I wish, how much I wish, that I could do something for you!"

The victoria was rolling through the busy, cheerful streets; vehicles making way for it in respectful haste, people saluting with more than mere formality and following the Regent with grateful eyes. Stanief's city, Stanief's country this, drawn by him out of anarchy into order,

out of suffering into peace. The people knew, and he knew. He looked across it all now before answering, battling with fierce loneliness and rebellion.

"Iría, what I have done for you is nothing. You are my wife," there was no mockery in the quietly spoken word, "and claim all I can give. But, since we are alone except for each other and have been placed together, would you care to save my pride some day by stepping at my side out of this court? By giving me the dignity of holding my household above the wreck?"

Startled and dismayed, she turned to him.

"Monseigneur, I do not understand! You, you to speak of wreck! Oh, and you ask me that, you doubt?"

He laid his hand warningly on hers.

"We are under a hundred eyes, Iría. You live aloof from politics and intrigues, but yet you know my regency ends in a few months."

"You mean—the Emperor?"

"The Emperor has never trusted me, never for-

given me for the chance which set me as ruler of his country. There is no danger of the old kind; the days of state executions are past, or I would never have survived the last reign. But when Adrian assumes command it will undoubtedly mean that I lay aside all you have seen of me, and retire a simple gentleman of leisure to my estates. No more will I play 'the regal game,' as Adrian expressed it to-day. Could you brave that, Iría, to be no longer the center of a brilliant court? To live the stately monotony of my life in the old castle among the mountains, or perhaps travel to other countries as just the wife of the Grand Duke Feodor Stanief, who is of no more importance than any noble? For Adrian will want to keep you, if you will stay."

The little hand under his turned to clasp his fingers; star-eyed, richly tinted with excitement, Iría leaned to him.

"With you, let me be with you. I am afraid of nothing with you, without you of everything. Oh, monseigneur, do you not see that what you

lose are a man's desires, not a woman's? Power, political influence, to guide and rule—what do such names mean to me? I shall miss nothing; it is only you who will grieve and regret."

"My dear, my dear," said Stanief unsteadily, and turned away his face before a new hope which out-dazzled all the morning's pictured loss.

"It is so, only do not speak again of leaving me here. I love the Emperor, but I am afraid of him. And if he can treat you in this way—"

"Hush; never blame him, however alone you fancy us. If you can help it, do not let him guess that I have told you of this. And for the rest, the fault is more Dalmorov's than his."

"I will not," she promised. And after a moment, "Some one else will follow you always, monseigneur."

He knew the answer before he asked the question, and the light went suddenly from his face, leaving it to all the old grave endurance.

"Who, Iría?"

"Monsieur Allard," she replied.

Stanief again looked across the teeming streets; it was as if a chill, intangible mist stole up from the near-by river and drew its cold grayness between the two who sat side by side.

"John is a loyal gentleman," he said, without anger; "I value you both above all else. For two years I have walked without seeing beyond a certain point, to-day I have come to a turn in the road and on ahead I see my destination. Not the end I hoped, perhaps, but at least I know. And I thank you for the household security which you have given to me, my poor child."

The carriage stopped in front of the quaintly splendid Palace Stanief. Iría lingered before accepting the Regent's aid to descend, her delicate lip curving distressedly.

"Do not call me that, please," she begged. "Because you have made me very happy, monseigneur."

The perfume of her daffodils was about him, faint, virginal, bitter-sweet as her presence in his house. Stanief deliberately painted to him-

self the fierce delight of catching her in his arms, of pressing the little sunny head to him and crushing her sweet ignorance out of existence with one kiss she could never forget. But his hand did not even close upon the small one resting in it.

"Then I have lived to some purpose," he responded serenely.

CHAPTER XIII

THE INTERVENTION OF ADRIAN

FOR Iría to attempt to hide a change of thought from the keen-eyed and sophisticated Adrian with his clairvoyant faculty of penetration was as futile as for a flower to resolve to shut from the sun the drop of dew in its golden heart. A week after her morning drive with Stanief, when Iría was passing one of her usual hours with the Emperor, he coolly put his finger on her secret.

"You are not yourself, *cousine*," he observed. "What has Feodor been telling you of me?"

"Oh!" Iría exclaimed in distress, regarding her youthful sovereign with wide, astonished eyes.

Adrian smiled with his fine malice.

"Come, confess. Or shall I guess? I am ungrateful, unappreciative, and swayed by Dal-

morov; not so? Moreover I am dangerous, and making my Regent extremely uncomfortable."

"Oh, no, sire. He bade me never blame you, indeed. He said nothing like that," denied madame impetuously, then stopped short.

"Then what did he tell you?"

"But I was not to repeat," she pleaded.

This time Adrian laughed outright and leaned forward to capture one of the lily-leaf hands and lift it to his lips. They were seated in the great octagonal library, which of all the palace was the Emperor's favorite room, Iría employed with a bit of the intricate embroidery always brought at his especial request. He was fond of watching her while her attention was fixed on the pretty task; and until a few months before Stanief had not infrequently made a third at the gracious pretense of domesticity. To-day, at the opposite side of the apartment and out of hearing, Allard chatted with two of Iría's ladies.

"You have not repeated, *cousine*," the in-

quisitor assured her. "I myself guessed. And since I appear to have guessed worse than the truth, you had better correct me. I will not tell Feodor."

She looked up at him then, flushing all over.

"If I tell you, sire," she retorted with pride, "I shall say so to monseigneur as soon as I see him. Must I speak?"

"I think you had better, *chère cousine*."

She laid the glowing tissue in her lap and met the raillery of his glance quite seriously.

"Then I will try to remember, sire, because the truth is always much the best to know. And I am certain you would not ask me to hurt him. He asked me if I would be ready to go with him when the regency ended and you sent him from court. He said that you had never trusted him, and could not forgive him for the government forced upon him. That was all, indeed. Except that he did say you thought highly of Baron Dalmorov; and, and, a few words just for me."

Adrian passed his hand across his eyes as if

to push back the hair from his forehead, and remained silent for a few seconds.

"If Feodor is not happy, he pays the penalty of having ruled," he returned, his strange unyouthful bitterness most repellant. "I am not happy, nor was my father, nor his father before him. And you would leave me to go with him, *cousine?* Think of it again. I offer you your household in the capital; until some day I marry, you will be still the first lady of my court. I loved you the first time I met you in Italy; you were so gentle, so different from all I knew. I was only a boy, Iría, but I resolved to bring you to my country some way; and I succeeded. What has Feodor to give compared with all I hold for you? Will you stay?"

"But I am his wife," she answered simply. "How could I stay, sire?"

"You love him so?"

Iría grew pale, then raised her hands to her cheeks to cover the returning color that dyed even her temples.

"I—I do not know," she faltered, aghast at a question never asked even of herself. "I—no—he does not me—"

He stared at her, for once thoroughly amazed.

"He does not love you?" he echoed. "You do not know? Why, Iría—"

She flashed into the first and last anger he ever saw in her.

"You forced us to marry each other, sire. We did not want it, no!" she cried, and raised the little, useless handkerchief to her eyes.

There was a pause, then Adrian dismissed the subject with a sentence that gave his companion food for thought during many a day to come.

"Poor Feodor," he said very compassionately. "Twice."

At the other end of the library Allard hesitated, broke the thread of his gay speech, and caught it up again incoherently.

"What is it?" queried the Countess Marya playfully.

"Monsieur Allard looks at the agitation of

madame," murmured the petite Baroness Alexia.

All three regarded the pair opposite, and exchanged significant glances.

"Lieutenant Vasili told me that Baron Dalmorov spent two hours with the Emperor last night. Is it so, monsieur?" added Alexia.

"Yes, Baroness," admitted Allard soberly.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I am to be married in September, myself. But I do care for the Grand Duchess; I am sorry for—this."

"I love the Grand Duchess," said Marya quickly. "And the Regent has been most good to me. Where they go, there go I."

Allard winced even in the approving smile he sent the pale young maid of honor, so hard it was to hear Stanief's fall predicted and discussed.

Iría recovered herself almost immediately and brought her gold-and-topaz eyes back to those of the Emperor.

"I would like to go, if I may, sire," she said.

"Are you offended with me, *cousine?*"

"Certainly not, sire."

He watched her fold the gleaming embroidery, tapping his fingers restlessly on the arm of his chair.

"You would go, and Allard," he mused aloud, "each after a duty, a love, an aim. I wonder if there was ever but one who centered all such thoughts in me, who made me the axis of his world?"

"You think of Baron Dalmorov, sire?" she ventured.

He gave her the desired permission by rising.

"You are anxious to go, *cousine;* pardon. Why, yes, Dalmorov; who else? Allard," he turned to summon the others, "Allard will have the honor of accompanying you to the carriage."

"No," protested Iría, but too late.

"No? You do not wish Allard's escort?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes, I—of course." She turned hurriedly from him, then looked back with a ges-

ture of helpless bewilderment and distress. "I wish you had not spoken, sire; I wish you had not spoken."

And as the others came up, she passed her hand through Marya's arm and left Allard and Alexia to follow.

All that day Stanief was immersed in councils and affairs. Not until evening did he and Iría meet, when she stopped in his study on her way to the opera, where no less a cavalier than the Emperor was to take her husband's place with her.

Standing straight and slim before him, her head drooping under its weight of silken floss and spanning jewels, her soft throat and dimpled shoulders crossed and recrossed by the manifold strands of the wonderful Stanief pink pearls, she repeated the conversation of the morning. Repeated it, all except the last part. Her eyes downcast, her gloved fingers twisted nervously together, the rosy gems gleaming uneasily with her rapid breathing, it was the Iría

of long ago he saw, the timid, shrinking girl whom Allard had brought from Spain.

Sensitive as a woman to the change, Stanief gazed and listened, finding no explanation in the story she related.

"That is all?" he asked gently, when she ended.

"Yes," she said faintly. "All that matters, monseigneur."

"You," he hesitated a moment for the right words. "You are not troubled, or displeased, Iría?"

She retreated a step, bending to gather round her the trailing satin and lace folds.

"No," she answered. "No, monseigneur. Good night."

Without his will, without his act, the delicate confidence between them was shattered. The frail, exquisite understanding that was too slight for friendship, too pale for love, had been destroyed. Afterward, in the days which followed, Stanief came to look back on that month

as the time when two existences crumbled under his touch.

When she had gone, he sat still for many moments.

"Adrian or Dalmorov," he decided. "I wonder—"

He touched the bell, the old dangerous drowsiness settling over his expression.

"Dimitri, you remember that I once placed in your charge a man found in this room?"

"Certainly, your Royal Highness."

"Have him brought to me; I am ready to see him."

Dimitri saluted and vanished. All unconsciously, Iría's taper, snowy fingers had touched the pieces on the grim chess-board, and moved them ever so slightly.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ORDEAL

FOR Allard that last summer of the regency brought the hardest of all things for a loving heart to bear: to stand in the shelter and watch a friend in the storm, to be forced to witness where unable to aid. No personal humiliation could have affected him so painfully as to see Stanief under the Emperor's stinging sarcasms and cold, young insolence, to note the furtive words and glances of the men who still courted present power while predicting its future fall.

Never after that morning of the contest of wills between the cousins, did Adrian's unforgiving sullenness lessen or relent. Day after day the Regent paid his formal visit and endured the ordeal with chill dignity. Day after day Adrian received him in the presence of Dalmorov or

half a dozen young nobles of the capital; usually on the point of going out, and so making the brief interview a mere farce. Only one courtesy the Emperor conceded to the self-respect of both; never did he make the least hint of menace or future reckoning except when the cousins were alone or with Allard. By inference alone could the rest of the court foretell the coming end.

And Dalmorov was radiant. His spare figure actually dilated and gained weight in these days of victory, his eye-glasses poised a trifle more superciliously before his pale eyes. Stanief looked above and past him with a certain lofty indifference, but between Dalmorov and the chafing, aching Allard a clash was inevitable. As they seldom met except when Adrian's desire for both compelled, it was not surprising that in his presence that clash occurred.

It was after Stanief had passed an especially difficult and trying hour with the Emperor, an hour which left Allard's nerves in quivering exasperation. When at last the Regent took leave,

Adrian rose at the same time and crossed to a window with his nonchalant languor of movement.

"Bring me those glasses we were trying this morning, Allard," he directed. "I want to see that ship entering the river."

But Allard did nothing of the kind. The fourth one present, Dalmorov, had just moved aside from the door with an indescribable smile and bow to the Regent.

"I have the honor to wish your Royal Highness good morning," he said sweetly.

Stanief glanced down at him, outwardly unmoved by the neglect of a courtesy compelled by every rule of custom and etiquette; but before embarrassment was possible Allard sprang forward and himself held back the door.

"Thank you," Stanief said only, but his eyes met the gray ones in passing.

"Really, Baron, for a diplomat you grow too absent-minded," commiserated Allard softly to his vis-à-vis. "One might have imagined you

intended that his Royal Highness should open the door himself."

"Since Monsieur Allard has become so learned in etiquette, he might observe that the Emperor is waiting," Dalmorov retorted viciously.

Allard shot a glance at Adrian, who had turned round just in time to witness the whole scene.

"At least, if I offend, I am careful to offend one who can retaliate, Baron," he flung back in an undertone, as he moved in quest of the article demanded.

"Who can, and whom you are in no position to provoke," Dalmorov sent after him, incautiously raising his tone with a bitter significance which the other failed to comprehend.

"When you are at leisure, gentlemen," Adrian's voice interposed coolly. "Dalmorov, I would suggest that you follow my cousin and explain your unfortunate lapse of memory. Allard, I believe I made a request."

There was little Allard could not have for-

given to Adrian for sending Dalmorov to make that apology.

"I beg a thousand pardons, sire," he answered contentedly as he crossed the room.

After all Adrian did not look at his ship, but remained leaning against the window with his reflective gaze fixed on the other's face.

"I wonder," he remarked, when the door had closed behind Dalmorov, "if you do things like that because you are an American."

Surprised, Allard smiled involuntarily.

"Perhaps, sire, we are rather *sans gêne*."

"You misunderstand me," he corrected. "I mean, do you act as the others would not, because you are not my subject as they are?"

Allard understood then, and the implied accusation stung him to hot anger.

"No, sire," he flashed. "I have not lived under your shelter and eaten your bread to hide beneath another flag when the scale turns. I am an American, yes, but I do not use my nationality as a cloak for cowardice. So far, I have

become your subject by entering your service."

Not until long afterward did Allard read the slow, half-amused smile that rose to the surface of the Emperor's dark eyes.

"Very good, we shall remember, Monsieur *l'Américain*," he returned, quite untroubled by the other's indignation. "Do not complain if some day I interfere with your affairs."

His affairs? Allard puzzled mentally. But he received no further explanation, and neither to him nor Dalmorov did Adrian again mention the incident.

Stanief looked very grave when Allard repeated the scene to him.

"You have made an active enemy of Dalmorov instead of a passive," was his comment.

"Why should I care, monseigneur? Where you go, I follow, when the end comes."

"The end," Stanief echoed dreamily. "Everything does not end for us at once, John; we leave our treasures all along the path as we journey."

Down his self-appointed path Stanief was moving steadfastly in those months. And the first treasure left behind, the hardest to resign, had been Iría's confidence. Locked within the old timidity, she avoided her husband whenever it was possible to do so, hiding her eyes from him when necessity brought them together, coming no more to his study.

But there was one exception: every morning, after Stanief's visit to the palace, she waited for him in her carriage. Silent, her hands clasped in her lap, replying with hesitating monosyllables, she sat by his side during the drive home, one of her ladies opposite them.

Before Adrian, Stanief lifted his head a little more proudly, let his lashes fall a little lower, and went on his way without protest. He had enough to do, as he toiled to place the country in a position to continue without him. Wisely, tactfully, striving not to antagonize the Emperor to the right policy by claiming it as his own, he prepared the guiding lines to lie peace-

fully in the inexperienced grasp soon to take them.

It was not a happy task, or a light one, and he worked at it absolutely alone except for Allard's passionate and powerless sympathy. But still he worked. And because there was so much to be done, it seemed to him that the days slipped through his fingers like beads of a broken chain.

So winter set its seal of silence on river and snow-muffled street before he realized the fading summer. With spring would end the regency.

"How many months now, cousin?" drawled the Emperor, returning from the races held upon the glittering ice of the river, and pausing on the steps of the palace to unclasp his too oppressive furs.

"Five, sire," answered the tranquil Regent. "I believe I have to congratulate your Imperial Majesty upon the victories in to-day's sport."

"My horses? Ah, yes; this is my fortunate year. Thank you, cousin."

And Allard, in attendance, bit his lip until a tiny thread of crimson sprang beneath the pressure.

Faster and faster the beads were slipping from the chain; the path was straight to the end and very short.

CHAPTER XV

AT THE GATES OF CHANGE

ONCE more Stanief was alone in his study, on the morning when Allard made his first rebellion. The windows were open and a warm, sweet breeze drifted the curtains into the room like snowy mists from the past winter, rustling on among the papers upon the writing-table, as Stanief laid down his work to listen to the visitor. It was so rare to see Allard excited and he was so vibrant with indignation as he stood before the other.

"Like that," he was declaring hotly, speaking English in his preoccupation, "and Dalmorov sneered, listening. 'My cousin is having his fine old country-place in the mountains renovated, Allard, so I am informed.' 'I know nothing, sire,' I said. 'He is very far-sighted,' he answered coolly. Monseigneur, I will not go back;

I came here to tell you that. I am weary of watching it; I will stay with you. I can come here as I always hoped to do, giving to you, not asking. Let me finish, please. The Emperor has been generous to me, however little so to you, and I am modestly rich in my own right. Why, the pension accompanying the star and order he gave me after that attempt to kill him, that alone is more than my solitary life requires. My tastes are simple—that automobile about which you laugh at me is not as you think. It is my pride to have regained my independence, monseigneur; to be able to come to you, free, and offer to do your secretary's work, Vasili's, what you choose, but to do it as a service of love. Long ago, on the *Nadeja*, I lent myself to aid your purpose, to make it mine. And now you have carried it through; next week the Emperor will be crowned. Now I claim the right to return to you; the work is done."

"John—"

"You can not refuse me that," he cried.

"You have taken my life and made it center around you, now you can not bid me tear that core out and go on."

As on their first night together, Stanief stretched his hand across the table for his companion's clasp.

"No," he answered lovingly, "we can not go on without each other. If you will stay with a sinking ship, come; I am selfish enough to let you. But the charge I gave you is not finished, nor my purpose yet fulfilled. You must go back until next week is over."

"The Emperor—" Allard began incredulously.

"The Emperor needs you more than ever before. There are too many people who cling to the peace of the last years, who dread change and would force me upon the throne at any cost. The Empire—not Adrian's court—the vast middle class, the merchants, the quiet, staid aristocracy, the very peasants, want all to continue as it is. If I were still to govern with the Emperor they would rest content, but they see it

will not be so. They fear Adrian, they know and detest Dalmorov and the party he represents. And they are not careful in their methods of obtaining what they want. John, if you knew the veiled insinuations, the bold offers, the tempters who pursue me night and day; if you knew how they watch for the hours when Adrian has been most hard, how they skilfully touch my pride, my patriotism, my resentment and knowledge of injustice, if you lived my life for twenty-four hours, then you might speak of weariness. But the worst—"

Aghast, Allard stared at him, deep after deep of the inner court opening before his dizzy gaze.

"The worst?" he repeated mechanically.

The hand on the table clenched; all the inherited lawlessness and ambition of a royal line blazed up in Stanief's darkly brilliant eyes.

"I want it," he said deliberately. "I want to rule this country, to toss Dalmorov from my path, to stamp out the satisfied triumph from these time-serving faces about me. I want to

play this splendid game and remain chief in the battles of diplomacy and statecraft. I want my wife to continue in the life to which she was born. And I know the power to accomplish all this lies ready at my hand; I have only to take. Oh, I am no Galahad or Cincinnatus, no patient despiser of earthly good; no longer even the idealist who spun his dreams on the *Nadeja*. I have tasted of a dangerous fountain, and I shall thirst for its purple-tinted water all the rest of my time. I have no bent, no inclination, for obscure inactivity."

"Yet?" Allard wondered.

Stanief leaned back and idly picked up the pen on his desk.

"Yet Adrian's coronation takes place next week, exactly. Are we sufficiently inconsistent, we others? And I will pass my life in a castle of the north, or wandering over Europe. I only spoke to show you that my days are not serene either, and why you must go back to keep your guard of honor with Adrian. I believe he is safe;

the secret police watch him ceaselessly and report to me. But I want you near him."

"I will go back now," assented Allard, utterly subdued. "You are right, I knew nothing of this. I owe so much to him, as well as to you. I wish I were a wiser guardian; I—that automobile—"

"Your automobile! My dear John, what has it to do with the matter? Or do you mean that Adrian gave it to you? I never knew that."

"Yes, he gave it to me," Allard smiled and frowned together. "It is nothing, of course. But I will not leave him again unless you wish or he compels."

"Thank you. You are going direct to the palace?"

"Yes; he sent me with a letter to madame."

Stanief winced, sighing. One trial he had not told Allard, yet exile would have been a light thing to bear if the fearless child Iría had still walked with him.

"Wait and I will go with you," he offered. "I

must have the Emperor's approval of these plans for next week. Have you delivered madame's letter?"

"Not yet, monseigneur. I am afraid I forgot it."

"Give it to me and I will leave it with her in passing. I have not seen her to-day."

It had come to that point; the cold and self-contained Stanief sought a pretext in these days to see the delicate face he loved. The Gentle Princess was hurting him as no one else could.

Up in her cream-and-azure boudoir, Iría was alone when Stanief entered. She was bending over a table heaped with water-lilies and purple Florentine irises from the conservatory, herself quite radiant with their reflected brightness as she lifted the heavy petals and breathed their fragrance. Her back to the door, she did not turn at once to see who came unannounced.

"Look, Marya," she called gladly and sweetly. "Come here; were ever things so lovely? So the irises grew at home, knee-deep in the clear pools,

like enchanted princes. And the lilies,—over them the dragon-flies hovered all day and between their stems the goldfish slept and played."

She moved with the last word and saw Stanief; a tall, soldierly presence in the filagree room.

"Oh," she exclaimed faintly, "pardon, monseigneur!"

"For what?" he demanded. "It is I who should apologize for disturbing you here. I have a letter from the Emperor for you."

"Thank you, monseigneur," she murmured, and accepted the massive envelop to lay it listlessly on the table.

Stanief looked at her. Like one of her own slim flowers she stood, her shimmering white morning dress leaving her round throat and arms bare. The full soft hair was caught in a great coil low on her neck, she wore no jewel except the slender gold chain and cross gleaming through the lace at her bosom.

"Why are you afraid of me?" he asked abruptly. "Why do you shrink from me as if my

touch were pain? What has come between us, Iría?"

"Nothing, monseigneur," her fingers interlaced in feverish nervousness.

"Nothing? Iría, Iría, will you tell me now to take you with me into my exile?"

"Yes, monseigneur," came the low reply, but her head drooped.

"And you think I would accept the sacrifice? You think—" He checked himself with a violent effort.

"I am sorry," she responded confusedly. "I—I have not changed."

"Then it is I?"

"No, no; please let me go, monseigneur."

"It is I who will go," he answered, shaken out of self-mastery for once. "Iría, I do not know who awakened you, who showed you the truth, perhaps it was my kindly cousin. But it is clear that you have seen. Iría, was your trust also so weak that it went down before a breath? Because I loved you, must you shrink from me?

Child, I loved you the first day that you gave me your shy friendship, I loved you all the months afterward, and was my care of you less careful for that? If you could have continued in your ignorance, would I have failed you?"

Before his passion and grief she retreated, mute, colorless, her dazed eyes upon him.

"You!" she gasped, "You—" then suddenly turned and hid her face among the heaped flowers.

"I did not hope that you could love me; I knew better than that," he said. "But I did hope that you would trust me. I thought I had earned that much, Iría. Let my fancies go; I will undo this as far as I may. You shall stay in the capital or go to your own home, whatever you choose. Only this week remains, and I lay down both my charges. Hush, and do not grieve; this is no fault of yours."

She was sobbing helplessly, her golden head among the white and purple blossoms. He drew a quick breath and stood for a moment, strug-

gling to regather around him the poor tattered cloak of reserve. But it was a relief to him that she could not see his expression when he crossed to her side.

"Forgive me," he said sadly. "I am not very wise to-day, or very kind, I am afraid. I have loved you; yes, and I loved Adrian during our quiet years. Some flaw in me there must be, that neither of you could give me the simple gift of trust. We will speak of this no more; somehow I will find a way for you. 'A Stanief guards his own.' "

His voice shook on the sentiment he would have spoken lightly; stooping with the fierceness of pain suppressed, he touched his lips to her bright hair.

"You," panted Iría, as the door closed. "You, monseigneur!"

He had gone; only the silver-fringed curtain still swayed to tell of his passage, the frail, feminine atmosphere of the place still quivered from the presence of a dominant energy.

Down in the open carriage—a massively luxurious vehicle with the imperial arms enameled upon the door—Allard waited for Stanief a long time. The Emperor, just returning from a drive and apparently in haste to have his note reach Iría, had sent the nearest messenger in his own carriage.

"Do you know what one might imagine, seeing this carriage here and you waiting in it?" playfully demanded Vasili, as he lounged against the wheel.

"What?"

"That the Emperor was paying a visit to his cousin."

"I wish he were," Allard sighed unguardedly.

"*I* never meddle with politics; *pas si bête.* But I wish I were the Emperor's favorite just now, as you are. There will be changes soon, *hein?*"

"I suppose so. No one can tell."

"No, of course not. Do you know, I would like to be off in the *Nadeja* next week."

"The Regent is coming," Allard warned, gladly seizing an escape from the conversation.

Vasili swung around and clicked his heels together, saluting stiffly. Allard stepped down from the carriage.

"You need not come, Vasili," Stanief remarked, as he took his seat. "Monsieur Allard will accompany me. Come, John; we are late."

The horses sprang forward.

The drive through the streets, gay with preparations for the coronation and crowded with busy people, was attended by the manifestations grown familiar. More eager way was made for Stanief than for the Emperor himself; the glances which followed him were grateful and keenly anxious. Once a girl in a passing farmer's cart rose to toss into the carriage a sheaf of wildflowers.

"Little Father of the People!" she called in the soft, guttural vernacular.

It was a title given only to sovereigns; Stanief flushed and frowned together.

"That will not do," he commented drily, leaning back in the shadow of the victoria top.

"You have permitted them to think, and they give you their verdict," Allard answered.

The carriage turned from the great square to an avenue leading toward the palace. Densely packed with people, there was a brief pause before the way could be cleared. Noting a change in the atmosphere, a chill and more nervous haste, Allard lifted his eyes to his companion.

"This carriage, and with you in the shadow, monseigneur," he observed,—"they think it is the Emperor who passes."

The reply was not made by Stanief. Straight and surely aimed, a missile hurtled from an upper window in one of the buildings and fell on the cushions beside him.

"For peace and freedom!" shrieked a man, leaning from the window in half-insane excitement and waving his arms above his head. "No Adrian—for the Emperor Feodor!"

The crowd grew white with upturned faces;

then, comprehending, broke into tumult and panic. Screaming, frantic, one and all turned to fly from the vicinity of the carriage. Allard snatched the bomb from the seat and rose to fling it from him, but even as he checked himself, Stanief seized his arm.

"Not into the people, John," he ordered sharply. "Better keep it here than that."

"Go, you!" Allard implored, turning the smoking object in his hands for examination. "Go, monseigneur!"

Above the uproar of the fighting, shrieking mob rose the agonized cry of the man at the window as he saw the Regent's face:

"You! You! The fuse, pull the fuse!"

"Fuse?" echoed Allard, catching at a small hanging thread of cotton. "Monseigneur, go, go! I can handle this—"

The cotton broke off short; a steady hissing warned them that it still burned inside.

"Give it here," Stanief commanded collectedly. "Get your penknife."

The two men bent above the oval, gray messenger of hate and death. Around them raged indescribable disorder; the very coachman and footmen had fled from the carriage.

"If you would go!" Allard panted, his voice tense.

"Bah," said Stanief, and forced the bomb from him.

An ominous snapping came from within. Stanief's strong white fingers fitted themselves to the crack and with a superb effort he twisted the thing in half.

"Ah!" gasped Allard, blinded, as a great cloud of smoke rushed forth.

Stanief drew out the fuse as it reached the end, and flung it into the street.

"Lighted too late," he explained. "Our terrorists are clumsy."

"They meant it for Adrian," he answered. "You were right."

They found each other's hands through the choking fumes; Allard's fingers scorched by the

guncotton, Stanief's bruised and bleeding from the force used to open the machine.

As the smoke cleared they looked around, then back at each other. They were alone in a deserted street. Distant cries, increasing tumult, announced the spreading panic. Three blocks away flashed the green-and-gold of the palace guards as they charged to the scene, over pavements littered with fallen garments, the contents of overturned vehicles, and the vehicles themselves. The well-trained horses of the royal carriage had stood still, accustomed to public demonstrations of a different nature but similar violence.

"Really," Allard exclaimed, on the verge of laughter. "Really, monseigneur—"

"There has been some excitement," Stanief assented. "Will you go on to the palace and explain to the Emperor? I am going back to reassure madame."

Their attendants were creeping shamefacedly back to their posts, seeing all was over. The

line of soldiers swept down upon the carriage, a very pale officer in command.

"I will do," said Allard, "anything you want."

If the uproar had been great at the attack, it trebled as the furious crowd surged back in search of the assailant. The guards were obliged to close around the Regent to shield him from the frenzied and hysterical joy of the people at his safety. The slow return to his home was one continuous ovation, almost the cheering masses prevented advance.

Long before Stanief reached his goal, Allard had arrived at the palace. No less excitement reigned there. Without need of explanation, Allard was hurried to the Emperor, questioned and congratulated on every side.

He met Adrian in the hall, and at sight of his messenger, blackened with smoke, hatless, still pale with the strain of those perilous moments, the Emperor sprang forward and caught his arm.

"Feodor?" he cried fiercely, his voice ringing

through the lofty corridors. "Speak, speak; where is Feodor?"

"Sire, he has returned to madame the Grand Duchess."

"Safe? You are not deceiving me, he is safe?"

"He is unhurt; he destroyed the bomb before it exploded," Allard explained incoherently. "His hands are cut, no more."

Adrian dropped the other's arm and drew back; for hours Allard felt the bruise of that feverish grasp.

"To madame," he repeated.

"Sire, he ordered me to bring an acccunt of the affair to your Imperial Majesty. He can be sent for," Allard suggested eagerly, catching a daring hope from the apparent emotion.

Adrian favored him with a saber-keen glance.

"Why should I wish to see him?" he demanded harshly. "If he is uninjured, very good; we will send our congratulations. You are exhausted, Monsieur Allard; go to your apartments and recover yourself. Alisof," he turned upon the

group of listeners, "you will inform the chief of police that I shall replace him next week if he completes this exhibition of inefficiency by letting the assassin escape. And when he captures the man, he will report to me, not to the Regent."

Scarlet enough now under the streaks of grime, Allard moved aside to let him pass. All his self-control could not smother the blazing indignation in his gray eyes. But Adrian brushed past without regarding him, and went alone into the room beyond.

CHAPTER XVI

FIRE LILIES

THROUGH the uproar, between the crowding people, Stanief at last gained his own hall and partly quelled the confusion by his mere presence.

"Tell madame that I have returned and will visit her as soon as this smoke is removed," was his first direction on setting foot upon the steps.

But when he reached the head of the great staircase a white figure flashed down the hall to meet him.

"Monseigneur, monseigneur," moaned the silver voice. Before all the household, and Adrian's guards, Iría clutched Stanief's stained and blackened coat with small, eager hands and fainted on his breast.

"Stand back!" the master commanded as a score of dismayed attendants rushed forward

and the Countess Marya sprang toward her mistress. And lifting her easily in his arms, he carried her back to the cream-tinted boudoir left so shortly before and so nearly left for ever.

On the way the gold-and-topaz eyes opened, but she did not protest or move until Stanief set her down.

"John is safe," he said, with a tenderness that had long passed beyond jealousy. "Did they not tell you, dear?"

Iría caught the chair beside her.

"You," she panted. "They said you were hurt. Oh, your hands—"

"It is nothing."

"It is, to me. I thought you would die and never know that I loved you so, monseigneur."

"Iría!" he cried.

She held out her hands to him with passionate innocence and grief, the loose sleeves falling back to her shoulders with the gesture.

"I do, I do. Never say those things to me again, never leave me like that."

Dazzled, incredulous, he swept her to him, almost rough in his unbearable doubt and joy.

"And John? What of John?"

"You knew—"

"Knew? Child, you betrayed yourself the first time you spoke of him, the first time I saw you together. Why should I blame you for no fault of yours? How could I blame him, who never even guessed your thought? I never wondered at your choice; only, give me the truth now."

"But I love you," she said. "Monsieur Allard; I never thought of him like that after our wedding-day. You were so calm, so strong, I just rested with you and found no room for any other. On the voyage from Spain, I imagined somehow that Monsieur Allard was you, that you had come secretly to meet me, and so I almost taught myself to care for him. No more than that it was."

Closer he held her, searching the face of rose-and-pearl with his splendid, lonely eyes.

"Love of mine, make no mistake. I want you;

my dear, I have wanted you so bitterly long, and you have shrunk from me. You care now, Iría?"

"I have always cared, only I never knew until last year. Since then I have hidden from you because I feared you would see; because I never dreamed *you* cared."

With a tinkling crash the silver pin slipped from her hair, like a golden serpent the heavy coil unwound and fell over his arm, draping them both with rippling silk as he stooped to kiss her quivering lips.

After a moment she stirred slightly, her head still on his arm as she looked up.

"Now you will take me with you?" she breathed, in delicious content. "Now you will not leave me with the Emperor, Feodor?"

For the first time in many weeks Stanief laughed, reveling in their knit gaze.

"Poor Adrian! How can he punish his rebellious Regent, since he must leave me you? In a garden of fire my lily has opened. Where shall

we go, Iría, on our golden journey? To your perfumed South?"

"May I choose?"

"You may command."

"Then take me to your own old castle in the hills. Shall it not be our home?"

"Hush, you have spoken a word I never knew; let me listen to it for a moment."

Outside the city roared unheeded, unheard.

CHAPTER XVII

AN ARABIAN NIGHT

THE Emperor's congratulations and formal inquiries duly arrived, borne by a glittering officer who was so impressed by the coldness of the message intrusted to him that he scarcely raised his eyes during its delivery. He had the misfortune to be attached to the Regent.

But Stanief received all unmoved. A clear scarlet burned in his dark cheek, his drowsy eyes glowed with some inward fire. He had just left the Grand Duchess and still carried traces of the recent accident, but he smiled in utter tranquillity as he listened, and gave his reply. It was too unaccountable; actually dismayed by the indifferent composure, the officer retired, and found himself stammering again when he repeated the answering message to the Emperor.

Adrian was at dinner, or rather had just con-

cluded, when he found time to receive the envoy; and he set down his glass to study this embarrassment in a courtier of twenty years' standing. He was always cynically interested in such situations.

"What else did the Grand Duke say?" he demanded.

"Sire, nothing was said except that which I have had the honor to report to your Imperial Majesty."

"Nothing to you?"

"Nothing, sire."

Adrian made no sign, yet the unfortunate equery was conscious that he was not believed.

"My cousin appeared well?" came the inquiry.

"Perfectly well, sire. Remarkably so."

"I am enchanted to hear it; he has need of steady nerves. That will do."

He pushed away the glass and rose, his glance encountering that of Allard near him.

"You almost hate me to-night, Allard?" he questioned softly.

Allard, in evening dress, the tiny jeweled star of honor flashing on his coat, was very different in appearance from the smoke-grimed gentleman of noon, but his gray eyes met Adrian's in the same indignation with which they had shone from beneath the stains of the explosion.

"Almost, sire," he acknowledged.

Staggered by the unexpected frankness, Adrian nearly lost his self-possession for the first time in his seventeen years. But he recovered immediately.

"Thanks for the 'almost'," he said with nonchalance. "Just bring my cloak; I want you to go with me."

Amazed at himself, Allard obeyed, humiliatingly aware that he had been scarcely decorous and certainly unwise.

"I beg your pardon, sire," he said seriously, as he offered the cloak.

Adrian surveyed him calmly.

"Was it true?" he queried.

In spite of himself Allard smiled.

"Almost, sire," he confessed.

"Truth is a virtue, at least theoretically, and needs no apology. Moreover, I challenged you. Come."

And Allard followed.

It was, of course, impossible to question the Emperor, but Allard's anxiety nearly betrayed him into the indiscretion as Adrian slipped on the cloak and led the way to a small private salon from which a staircase permitted reaching the street unobserved. For, in common with Peter the Great and Harun-al-Rashid, Adrian occasionally indulged in rambles about his capital, incognito, and with Allard for sole companion. It was a habit only a year old, of which even the omniscient Stanief was ignorant. The Emperor had made it a point of honor with his confidant to guard the secret absolutely; and many a bad hour had Allard passed in consequence. No one suspected the true reason why the American had bought a compact, exquisite Italian automobile during the summer before; or guessed the iden-

tity of the slim young chauffeur, masked and wearing the usual shapeless coat, who drove the machine through the streets at dusk or later. But it was a current tale for laughter in the clubs that Monsieur Allard had been arrested four times for overspeeding his car and each time had paid his fine without a murmur, himself assuming the blame and exonerating his chauffeur.

Perhaps, being young himself, Allard also had enjoyed the variety and slight peril of these excursions. But then the city had lain quiet under the Regent's strong hand, while now—

For once he was pleased to see Dalmorov, who rose at their entrance into the salon. At least his presence proved that nothing wholly secret was intended.

"The carriage is ready, Baron?" Adrian asked, drawing on his gloves with his leisurely decision of movement.

"It waits at the lower door, sire."

"Very good. Are you ready, Allard?"

"Sire, I did not understand—"

"Well, you have always a coat here, I think."

That was true, and taking a key from his waistcoat pocket Allard silently opened the wardrobe that held their apparel for the motor trips. It was Adrian's affair, not his, if the proceeding awakened Dalmorov's ever-active curiosity.

However, the baron's attention was fixed on the master, not the man; he was watching Adrian with intent and crafty eagerness. He barely glanced at Allard when he came back ready to go out.

"I also may have the honor of accompanying your Imperial Majesty?" he urged.

"No," Adrian returned.

"Sire—"

"No, Dalmorov. Come, Allard."

But Allard stood still.

"Sire, dare I ask where?" he said, with firm respect.

"To drive to the cathedral and observe the

preparations for next week," was the dry explanation.

"Pardon me yet again; without escort?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps Monsieur Allard disapproves," suggested Dalmorov sarcastically.

"I do," Allard declared, taking a step toward Adrian and throwing back his head obstinately. "It is not fit for the Emperor to go on the streets to-night. Sire, I have talked with Captain Alisov of the guards and with Zaliski of the secret police, and it is a seething frenzy of excitement out there. This morning's attack has brought to the surface the most dangerous elements in the capital. To-morrow all may be under control, but to-night it is not fit."

"Your affectionate solicitude overwhelms me, Allard," Adrian retorted.

The irony and the allusion brought Allard's color, but he maintained his position.

"Sire, I state a fact. There is real and serious danger in such a drive this evening. I beg

you to consider seriously the event occurring at noon."

"I am not Feodor; the attack was on him. Let him keep his house if the people make it necessary."

This of the adored Regent, for whom the whole Empire mourned in bitter regret! It was too much.

"Sire, the attack this morning was intended for you," Allard flung with exasperated bluntness. "When the assailant saw the Grand Duke, he shouted directions how to prevent the explosion. It was meant for you; all the court and city know it."

Adrian stood quite still, looking from one to the other. Aghast at the introduction of rude truth, not venturing to deny what could be verified, Dalmorov found no words.

"For me?" the Emperor repeated.

"Yes, sire. And for that I am amazed at Baron Dalmorov's willingness that you should go out."

"It is safe," cried Dalmorov furiously. "If you are afraid, Monsieur Allard, of your own tales, ask to be left here and let me attend his Imperial Majesty."

If the statement regarding the morning had made any impression on Adrian, he shook it off as soon as received.

"So; suppose I adopt that suggestion, Allard?" he remarked.

"Sire, if you go out I shall have the honor of going also."

"If I choose that you shall," the Emperor replied.

His eyes afire, Allard touched the star upon his coat.

"If this gives me any claim to your consideration, sire, you will not refuse me the privilege of accompanying you. I did not speak for myself, indeed I think you scarcely believe so; I spoke because the imperial carriage will attract every eye and recognition will be certain. There is no one in the Empire for whom the worst dis-

tricts would be so dangerous as the brightest avenues will be for you, sire."

"You invited me out into that, Baron?" was the incredulous question.

"Because it *is* safe, sire. Because the Regent keeps the secret police on guard and I informed—" he checked himself abruptly.

The comprehension that rushed to Adrian's expression was far from pleased.

"Oh; I was to go out for a private tour of observation, surrounded by the secret police. All my compliments, Dalmorov. It would doubtless have been safe, if somewhat misleading."

"No, sire—"

"Let me explain, Allard," he went on, mercilessly ignoring the baron's dismay at the exposure of his designs before Stanief's friend. "Dalmorov has long been interested in showing me the spirit of the capital and the necessity for various changes in the government. And regarding to-day as the climax of dissatisfaction with the Regent's methods, he proposed a quiet

drive through the principal streets as a means of gaging the public feeling. He suggested that I would find such a trip an amusing novelty."

Remembering their many expeditions Allard's lips twitched, in spite of his indignant disgust at the intrigues which were dragging Stanief down with myriad nets of cobweb spinning.

"So I consented. The baron felt very strongly the conviction that the people themselves would prove to me the necessity of a different mode of rule at once. Now it appears that his zeal deceived him, and we can very well wait to conclude affairs with dignity next week. That will do, Dalmorov; the loving care that made you surround me with secret guards might also have impelled you to arrange the crowds from which I was to gather my opinion. I shall remain at home to-night. Pray say so to the police with whom you and the Regent annoy me, and send the carriage back to the stables."

Dalmorov waited an instant for the storm to

settle. It was not the first stinging rebuke he had endured from the young autocrat, but he had the consolation of knowing that few or none of the court escaped the same infliction.

"I acted from the purest motives," he began, with profound humility. "If my too-great anxiety has displeased your Imperial Majesty, I am grieved to the heart."

Adrian turned to him again, his brow quite clear.

"Nothing can alter my regard for you, my dear baron," he interrupted kindly. "Only, do not interfere another time. Go, do my errand; I shall spend this evening looking over some plans with Allard. Good night."

There was a pause after the door closed. Adrian stood slowly removing his gloves, which he abstractedly tossed with his cloak upon the nearest chair, and Allard remained waiting patiently. With the latter's relief at the decision was mingled a vague wonder at the parting glance he had received from Dalmorov. Cer-

tainly worsted in the late passage of arms, the baron nevertheless had looked at his antagonist with malevolent and sinister triumph, a distinctly gratified hate. Was it because he divined that the American suffered with Stanief's hurt, and would go with him into voluntary exile? There seemed no other solution, yet—

"Open the wardrobe and take out our wraps," Adrian's matter-of-fact tones broke in upon the reverie. "I will walk to the garage with you, since the palace is watched, instead of letting you bring the car here."

"Sire!" gasped Allard.

"I told you after dinner that I was going out; I never change my mind. Simply, Dalmorov is eliminated. Make haste, please."

In despair of gaining more, Allard obeyed, his brief satisfaction ended. Resignedly he assisted Adrian into his long coat and put on his own, finding what comfort he could in the fact that they had taken many such journeys undetected.

In spite of his injunction to make haste, the Emperor did not take at once his cap and gauntlets but remained dangling his mask by its ribbons and watching his companion's preparations.

"Allard," he said, "you have the faculty of finding yourself in posts of danger and making yourself famous. It is an art, or a destiny, that of being apropos. Three years ago you acquired a scar and a star in protecting me; now you have repeated the exploit for Feodor. Come here."

Wondering, Allard turned.

"Pardon, sire," he objected, "I did nothing at all for the Grand Duke. He himself destroyed the bomb; I merely looked on and tried to help."

"Ah? Well, the Grand Duke and the rest of the capital do not agree with you. In the newspapers of several continents you are figuring as an example of self-possessed bravery and devotion to our house; probably you do not care, but the world must have its sensations. And since Feodor can not give the tinsel toys that

accompany such events, affairs are left in my hands. Bend your head—so."

He had lifted a slender, glittering cordon he himself wore, and deftly threw it around the other's neck with the last word. Completely taken by surprise, Allard had no time for retreat.

"Sire, I should prefer not!" he exclaimed decidedly, almost angrily. "I— the Grand Duke is my friend; such things have no place between us. Forgive me, and allow me to decline."

"I do not care in the least whether you prefer or not," Adrian replied, with the most perfect indifference. "Or whether you earned it or not. It is simply a question of dignity. This is expected of me, and I refuse to have it said that I place a higher valuation on my own life than on that of any one else. You will accept, and wear the order. Of course you do not prize the plaything; neither do I. Shall we go?"

The presentation was sufficiently incongruous, indeed the whole scene was typical of Adrian

himself in its mingling of medieval and ultra-modern: the two men in their half-opened motoring coats, and beneath, the gleam of the quaint, ancient, gemmed symbols. And the Emperor added the final touch by picking up the hideous goggled mask and putting it on.

"Let us go," he repeated.

Allard looked down at the pendant Maltese cross of rubies as he buttoned his coat, then caught up gauntlets and cap, and went to open the door.

"Dare I offer my thanks after being so ungracious, sire?" he asked contritely.

"If you choose. But I would rather have you remember in the future that I gave you the decoration before we took this drive, not after."

It was useless to endeavor to understand Adrian's enigmatical moods, but that sentence puzzled Allard for many hours, whenever it recurred to him.

The walk to the garage was accomplished as often before. Several times they passed men

whom Allard recognized as belonging to the secret service, and doubtless passed many more whom he did not know, all letting the Emperor's favorite go by, unquestioned, with his companion. But he sighed with relief when they finally reached the garage and he stepped into the low, silver-gray machine beside his pretended chauffeur. A man flung open the wide doors, Adrian bent forward with truly professional ease and nonchalance, and they were out in the damp night air.

Through the humming, fevered city they slipped, merely one of many vehicles. The streets were filled with walking people, without destination or object, walking only from consuming restlessness or excitement. The murmur of countless voices rose above the throbbing voice of the automobile as it wound in and out among the crowds. On every corner men were collected in groups, noisy or quiet according to their class, but alike in grim earnestness. Policemen and soldiers were everywhere; spurred by the

Emperor's threat, the chief of police was sifting the city grain by grain for the criminal of the morning.

Not to the cathedral did the gray car take its flight, and Allard's amazement reached its culmination when they halted before one of the capital's main hotels, under the glaring electric lights. For the first time it dawned upon him that there was an object behind the apparent capriciousness of the trip.

"I am to descend?" he hazarded, as his companion did not speak.

"No; you are to wait for me."

"I—you—"

Adrian deliberately stepped down and crossed the bright, crowded sidewalk into the lobby, deigning no explanation whatever. Utterly stupefied, powerless to interfere, Allard watched him; saw him hand a card to the attendant who advanced, then follow on into an elevator and disappear. The huge hall was filled with chatting men and women, many of them moving in

the court or diplomatic circles; to the watcher's excited fancy it seemed impossible that they should not recognize the slight, erect figure; it seemed that Adrian's identity cried out from every leisurely movement, every turn of the small imperious head. But presently the attendant returned alone, tranquil and smiling.

It was fully an hour that Allard waited, each of the sixty minutes an hour in itself. Many of those passing knew and bowed to him; some came over to congratulate him on the day's escape or to ask questions concerning it. One or two ladies paused with their escorts to shower him with effusive compliments. Knowing nothing of Adrian's intentions, he dared not even assume the partial protection of his mask. The climax arrived with the vibrating roar of another automobile, which fell into silence behind him as Count Rosal came placidly around to greet his friend.

"You, Allard," he welcomed languidly. "I thought you were on duty every night."

"Not this evening; the Emperor," he recollected the fiction told Dalmorov, "the Emperor is busy with some plans."

"I have been with the Regent. Do you believe it, the accident has made him look years younger. There must be some tonic in gunpowder and sulphur fumes. But you, you appear rather upset and pale; or is it these abominable lights?"

"It has been a hard day. I am too tired to be amusing, Rosal."

Rosal put his foot on the running-board without the least sign of going away.

"Then why are you not at home?" he very naturally inquired.

"Because I had an errand; I was too nervous to rest."

"Waiting for some one?"

"My chauffeur."

Rosal settled his eye-glass, extracted a case of cigarettes which he proceeded to offer to Allard, and himself selected one of the contents.

"Tell me," he said confidentially, "is it true

that the Emperor took scarcely any interest in the Regent's escape?"

"No." Allard watched a descending elevator with keen anxiety; the fear that Adrian had been decoyed into some trap was becoming unbearable, yet it was impossible to go in search of him.

"They say so at the palace, and all over the city. They say he did not even give a word of praise to you."

Aroused to justice as well as a desire to shield Stanief, Allard withdrew his eyes from the hotel entrance to regard his visitant.

"Does this seem so?" he demanded irritably, and pushed aside his coat to permit a glimpse of the fiery gem he wore.

Rosal's cigarette fell to the pavement; the idle patrician was well skilled in matters heraldic.

"That!" he cried, dazzled and envious.

Allard shrugged his shoulders and leaned back.

"Were you going somewhere?" he asked.

"Oh, no; just trying to avoid being bored. Every felicitation, my dear Allard; that is superb. You have nothing to fear from next week, evidently. Vasili told me yesterday that Dalmorov was speaking so kindly of you that it positively alarmed him. The baron praised everything you had ever done, from the time you came aboard the *Nadeja* at New York. And he asked all manner of questions about the trip over and the Grand Duke's fondness for you."

"Yes?" Allard responded absently. He could see an illuminated clock down the street, and he resolved that when the hand reached the hour he would defy Adrian's order and go in quest of him.

"Yes. A jealous animal, Dalmorov. New family; the title is only three generations old. I shall go to Paris next week; he never liked me very much, and there is a new singer at the Théâtre Français. *Tiens*, here is your man!"

Allard turned sharply, catching his breath.

Rosal, who knew the Emperor so well,—could he be deceived? Certainly he could not keep the secret if it were learned, not if the mines, exile and sudden death itself awaited his disclosure; every club in the capital could have afforded tales of "*ce bon bavard Rosal.*"

Adrian came through the vestibule and across the sidewalk with absolute composure. At Rosal he barely glanced while raising his gloved hand in conventional salute to the owner of the car.

"Good night, Rosal," Allard said pointedly.

Rosal did not move from his position, blocking entrance to the machine and surveying the arrival with mild interest.

"This is the chauffeur who drives over the limit about once a month?" he asked, with genuine continental and aristocratic insolence to a supposed inferior. "My man, do not apply to me for a position when your master tires of you; you are too expensive a luxury."

Adrian saluted imperturbably.

"He is English, he understands no French," Allard interposed. "Really, Rosal, I am in haste."

"The Emperor will want you? Alisov told me his Imperial Majesty was particularly difficult to-day, so I do not envy you. He is never facile, eh? Once more, congratulations."

Adrian's white teeth flashed in the electric light as he averted his face from the unconscious Rosal and entered the automobile. He was still smiling under his mask when he sent the machine leaping forward.

"I would have given a good deal to have heard your unbiased reply to that, Allard," he remarked.

"I fear you would not have been flattered, sire," was the grim answer. "I have spent an unendurable evening. Let me implore you to return to the palace."

"Eventually. Put on your mask; we are going driving."

Allard obeyed in dumb protest, his powers of

remonstrance exhausted, and resigned himself to as disagreeable an hour's sport as he could imagine. But it was almost enough for the time being to feel his charge beside him in comparative security.

As if impelled by perversity, Adrian drove through one swarming avenue after another, across the square and down the street where the morning's attack had taken place, swinging finally into the dark, deserted park. Too early in the season, too late at night, for promenaders, the quietness here was in vivid contrast to the scenes just left.

Tired out by excitement and strain, bearing the constant aching regret for Stanief's setting star, Allard had been gradually lulled into mesmeric quiescence by the shifting lights and shadows. And by a freak of exhausted nerves, it was old things thrust out of sight for years which took shape out of the dark and dragged their ugliness before him in a strange waking nightmare. He forgot the risk of accident, the dan-

ger of the return through the city, but he saw Desmond's rugged face framed in the doorway of the cottage above the Hudson and felt the anguish of the abandonment to worse than death. Pictures of his trial rose persistently, details of the intolerably bitter months of prison lashed his pride.

"You spoke?" Adrian's cool voice broke in.

"Pardon, sire; an old pain caught my breath."

Unnoticed by one of its passengers, the automobile increased its speed, rocking softly from side to side, leaping with cat-like lightness the inequalities of the road. One might have imagined that the driver also fled from his own thoughts through the empty parkways. Allard saw nothing; here in the heart of Europe, by the Emperor's side, the hateful gray walls had closed around him and he relived the unlivable. He was stifling, suffocating, with the sweet spring air singing past like a strong wind.

A sharp whistle pierced above the whining

purr of the motor, a shouted command. Allard started up, bewildered, and the black mood fell from him as a muffling garment cast aside. They had emerged again into the city, at the same gait.

"The police, sire," he warned reproachfully. "We must stop."

"I will not. Let them try to catch us."

"They will know the car."

"Then we will pay the fine, to-morrow. If they threaten worse I will pardon you."

The irony of that might have brought Allard's laugh if he had not been distracted by the view ahead.

"Not possible, sire; there is a regiment crossing at the head of the square. If we are examined—"

Adrian sullenly shut off the power and came to a standstill. He had no desire to have his amusement ended and made an anecdote all over the Empire.

"Tell them you are on my affairs," he directed,

as the two pursuing officers galloped toward them. "Or anything you choose. I will not go through a police station farce to-night, do you understand?"

Allard did laugh that time, the relief of waking to reality still tingling in his veins.

"Then I must go alone, if they insist. May I ask to take the driver's seat and claim his responsibility?"

"For what? They would take the machine. Do you expect me to walk alone to the palace?"

"Good heavens, no!" Allard exclaimed vehemently.

The two riders came panting up as Adrian replied with an expressive shrug.

"You are under arrest, messieurs," was the crisp announcement.

Allard leaned out into the light of the street lamp, taking off his mask and shaking his coat unbuttoned from top to bottom. Perhaps a memory of Rosal's admiration prompted the last move.

"For over-speeding?" he inquired sweetly.

"Certainly; monsieur was going at least forty miles an hour."

"Ah, but my errand was important. I am Monsieur Allard, of the household of his Imperial Majesty."

John Allard's name was linked with Stanief's on every tongue in the capital that night. Moreover, he stood up as he spoke and his coat fell apart, revealing the confirming luster of jewels and his elaborately careful dress.

"We are desolated, Excellency," the man stammered.

"Oh, you were quite right, but I assure you that it would be a mistake to carry this further. I am on an errand for—some one not to be questioned. Just fail to remember that you saw me, and there will be no trouble."

He held out a hand in which a yellow coin gleamed alluringly. The officer coughed, and stooped.

"Yes, Excellency. Graciously excuse our stu-

pidity; it is true that the light misled us as to the speed of your Excellency's car."

"Exactly. Good night."

"Good night, Excellency."

"Allard, Allard," drawled Adrian, throwing his levers, "bribery and deception! And under my eyes."

"I obeyed orders, sire," he retorted demurely. "May I drive?"

"*La belle excuse!* However, I admit the coercion. No, you may not drive; I will consider your reputation the rest of the way."

This time they turned home, at a more modest pace. Again they ran the gauntlet of the brilliant, sullen streets, and Allard's heart lost a beat with each halt made necessary by the crowd or each glance from the knots of men gathered on the corners. At the sleepy garage they at last arrived, and left the automobile.

It was but a short distance to the palace, and they walked in silence until almost before the door, when Adrian paused for an instant.

"You guard me so carefully, with so much energy, my inconsistent Allard," he observed, the lighter manner of the last hours hardened into his usual coldness. "Have you then not thought what it would mean to your beloved Regent if I were removed?"

"Sire, if I thought of that it would be to guard you with double care," Allard flashed, shocked and deeply wounded. "Surely I owe so much." And after a moment, recovering a little, "For that matter, even the Baron Dalmorov admits the protection that the Regent draws around your Imperial Majesty. Sire, if the Grand Duke planned treason, has he not had ample opportunities before now?"

"Are you trying to convince me that some one still exists who possesses a sense of duty?"

"Perhaps you will more readily credit a sense of honor, sire."

"Perhaps. So it is a point of honor to take care of me?"

"Yes, sire."

Adrian turned and went on without comment. The guard at the door saluted Allard without regarding the uninteresting figure of the chauffeur, and they passed into the safety of the palace.

When they were once more in the little salon and had slipped off their wraps, the impression seized Allard that his companion was rather pale and fatigued. Either from the pallor or from recent excitement Adrian looked younger than usual as he stood pushing back the dark hair disordered by his mask, and the watcher was pierced by remorse and something of Stanief's wide pity for the one so warped by circumstance and environment. Very kind to him the Emperor had been, the Emperor who next week would send away the only two men who cared for him and stand splendidly desolate in his treacherous court. The pathos of it beat down resentment. And being transparent, Allard's gray eyes betrayed the softened thoughts as they encountered the other's.

"Well?" Adrian questioned, as if to a spoken phrase.

"You will not believe me, sire, but—I would guard you if nothing compelled."

Adrian made a movement of surprise, then smiled at Allard with almost his cousin's charming grace.

"Why should I not believe you, who are truth itself? Thank you, Allard. Pray come with me; it is time to rest, I fancy."

Allard hurriedly put away their motoring garments, and presently they went from the room.

But the Emperor was not one around whom gentle illusions long could cling; sword-like he slipped through such gauzy fabrics. As they parted for the night he regarded Allard keenly, with even a suggestion of amused cruelty.

"If you have found me indecorously frivolous to-night," he said, "remember how near we are to next week. It will be a robust sense of honor that survives next week, Allard. You can not

conceive how earnestly I desire my day for which I have waited so long."

Allard stiffened to the rigidity of self-control; comprehending all the allusion to Stanief, he found no reply he dared give.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LAST WEEK

AS the first week of the regency had been, so the last week was a dazzling confusion, a series of gorgeous pageants, a riot of semi-Eastern splendor.

But if this last held all the rejoicing and glory of the commencement of a new reign, it held also the deep regret and dread of the passing of a tested security. The Empire loved Stanief with grateful fervor, it feared Adrian. Even in the court were those who foresaw a return to old disaster in the rule of the unguided and wilful young sovereign.

Yet before Stanief's own will all these elements were helpless. The court party proper triumphed, because the others lacked a leader. Dalmorov and his followers, the officials held to

strict account under Stanief's stern government, the officers and ministers deprived of bribes and pillage, the jealous and chafing nobles, all these turned in snarling glee to watch the fall.

Through all the chaos Stanief moved with a dignity never so great, carrying his head proudly above the conflict. Still the power lay in his grasp, and firmly he held the seething country to a semblance of calm. Many a shaft he received, many a veiled insolence and obvious taunt, growing bolder as the last beads slipped from his chain and the ungenerous enemies feared him less; but since the day of the attack he had borne himself like one who possesses a secret world of his own.

By his side Iría played her part, no less dreamily radiant. She at least met no bitterness except her own knowledge of the coming change; she had offended no one, and no one ventured to annoy the Gentle Princess whom Adrian's love might yet hold above the wreck. But it was noted as significant that the Emperor avoided

seeing either her or her husband, so far as possible.

The night before the coronation, Allard escaped from the palace and went to Stanief. Adrian had released him earlier than usual, and he was furious before some new arrogance of the victorious party.

"It is Dalmorov again, and always," he declared savagely. "Monseigneur, I never thought myself vindictive, but surely it is time for his reckoning. You once said you would crush him while you could; to-morrow—"

"To-morrow I can not," Stanief completed. "That is very true, John; to-morrow I can do nothing, nothing at all. *Sic transit*—you know the rest."

For the first time he had received Allard in the apartments of the Grand Duchess, and Iría was seated by her husband in rapt and silent content. They also had returned recently from the palace; the shining folds of Iría's court dress lay over the floor in billows of rose-and-silver;

again she wore the pearls whose tinted beauty echoed the soft luster of her face.

"To-morrow!" Allard exclaimed impetuously. "Monseigneur, monseigneur, it is a quarter to twelve!"

"So late? Well, so I would have the day find us: together. My Empire has shrunk to this room, yet left me a universe. For Dalmorov, be satisfied. Down in my desk are papers that can send him to a prison or a scaffold, as I choose. I have not been idle or forgetful; I thought of you."

"And we waste time! We who count minutes," he sprang to his feet, afire.

Stanief rested his head against the back of the chair, quieting the other's energy with a curious smile.

"My dear John, I have had those papers for two months; two months ago I sent to England the poor wretch who earned his pardon by aiding me to get them."

Stunned, Allard gazed at him.

"Two months?" he repeated. "Two months?"

All the long catalogue of insults, annoyances and petty wrongs rose before him, the open warfare and secret insinuations; slowly he gathered comprehension of the singular expression with which Stanief frequently had regarded his rival on such occasions.

"Perhaps I liked to play with him," the level voice resumed. "Perhaps I did not care to deprive the Emperor of his companion while I had still so much work to be done. But I think I waited because of a quixotic dislike to using my superior strength of position against an antagonist; to being both accuser and judge. I am not a child, I have no intention of letting him escape and work mischief undisturbed; simply I leave him to Adrian's justice."

"Then you—"

"I shall give the evidence to the Emperor after the coronation and before I leave the city. If he chooses to pardon Dalmorov, very good; my part is done. However, I would not value the

baron's chances much. My cousin is—my cousin."

"Yes," 'Allard admitted reluctantly, he too knew the steel-hard Adrian. "Only, it seems a pity to give him to-morrow."

Stanief laughed.

"And I fancied you 'Americans good-natured! Let Dalmorov go with all the glittering wreckage of my regency. I have found the better part."

Iría's little hand nestled into the one held out for it, and there fell a silence. 'Allard looked at them, then sighing turned his head. The memory of Theodora caught at his heart, Theodora, who had loved Robert and now grieved out her marred life, alone amidst the unvalued wealth so hardly bought.

From the great cathedral pealed the first rich bell of the chime. Iría lifted her finger in warning.

"Midnight," she said softly.

Stanief rose, and drawing her with him,

crossed to push aside the curtains before the open window.

"Come," he bade Allard. "The last night is gone. Look at the city, John; the board of our royal chess, at which I admit checkmate."

Out over the velvet blackness studded with myriad points of light the three gazed quietly. Already faint rumors of carnival awoke here and there. The capital stirred in its sleep with dreams of the morning, the morning whose sunrise would be greeted from every fortress and ship of the empire by seventeen guns.

"Never did the purple-and-gold sands slip less regretted from the hour-glass," said Stanief, no faltering in the low tones which an hour before had carried dominion over a nation. "Only one sorrow I have to-night, Iría, when with you and John I lay down the life we know."

She leaned closer against his breast, as if to throw her frail body across the gates of destiny.

"And that one, Feodor?"

"Adrian," he answered. "So near to my heart

lay pride in proving my loyalty, in convincing him of it and living down the lying distrust sown by his father and the court, so strong was my determination to lift my honor above disbelief and wear my ward's confidence as a decoration in all men's eyes. And I dreamed of helping him bear the heavy charge laid upon his slim shoulders. Fancies, boyish fancies wiser outgrown; I have learned better now."

"The world knows," she whispered.

"Yes; or will know. But I loved Adrian."

The quiet words fell with the last distant chime of bells. Listening, it seemed to Allard that no reproach leveled at the young Emperor could be so utterly hard to meet in the day of account as that wistful phrase.

Yet the spell of Stanief's tolerance lay on him also; the picture before him was not that of the familiar, ruthless autocrat under whom he lived, but of Adrian as he had stood in the little salon on the night of the drive, pushing back his tumbled dark hair with a gesture of infinite fatigue.

CHAPTER XIX

ADRIAN'S DAY

BRILLIANT in blue-and-gold the dawn opened over the capital. Scarcely a breath of wind rippled the warm clear air of the spring morning, a morning designed for a country bridal among the scented fields or the waking of wild furry creatures in the woods, and which man was seizing for such different use.

From the first deafening salute of cannon that ushered in the Emperor's seventeenth birthday, the city was in a tumult indescribable. Cavalry officers galloped through the swarming, flag-draped streets, gorgeous carriages blocked the avenues, marching regiments filled the air with military music. Congratulatory messages, visits from foreign ambassadors, enforced audiences and preparations for the one great event, kept

both palaces in kaleidoscopic movement and color.

The old sense of unreality held Allard from the moment when Vladimir awakened him three hours earlier than usual to don a costume hitherto considered reserved for evening. His usual duties were temporarily missing, the Emperor being formally attended to-day by those who had the hereditary right to that honor. Not that he was forgotten, at which he was surprised and touched, but it was very strange to be summoned to Adrian's bedside through an assembly of grave nobles and to speak a few brief words of felicitation under a fire of observation none too friendly. So often he had leaned against the foot of that pillared, curtained bed and amused with light chat of court or club the serene occupant who took his chocolate while listening interestedly.

"Thank you, Allard," the Emperor returned only in reply to his slightly confused speech, and the American was aware of the diverted, mali-

cious comprehension of his embarrassment under the ordeal.

But later he found his place carefully appointed in all the occurrences of the day, and realized the forethought with a gratitude and sense of obligation harder to bear than neglect. Very difficult Adrian was making his determination to follow Stanief; Allard knew now the pain of serving two masters.

The morning proceeded, the events pacing on in dignified order. At noon fell a pause, city and court poised on tiptoe, and the magnificent procession moved from the palace toward the cathedral.

It was all of mirage-like unsubstantiality to Allard: Adrian, strangely young and collected in his superb medieval robes, surrounded by his glittering nobles; Stanief, hardly less dazzling than the Emperor, with gemmed orders and cordons under which his white uniform almost disappeared; Iría in her fairy royalty, these were the central figures of the pageant. The cheering

crowds, the excitement and clamor, were merely a background. But once he met Dalmorov's cruel, exultant eyes as the baron smiled across the unconscious Stanief, and there was no more beauty in the scene.

At last the dim richness of the cathedral received them, the cool, incense-freighted twilight of the vast building, the wilderness of columns and lofty jeweled windows. Here the throng of witnesses was hushed, the organ tones fell soothingly after the noisy streets. The atmosphere of the place was infinite calm, and each ancient stone cried alike to victor and vanquished its garnered wisdom: "This, too, shall pass away."

Sighing, Allard sank passively into contemplation of the spectacle, Vasili by his side. Many times he had visited the cathedral with the Emperor, never again would he see it like this.

For all its pomp and solemnity, the ceremony was not long. When at last Adrian turned to face them, fully invested, when church and city rocked with acclamation, Allard felt the first

thrill of realization of what this meant. And he knew there was nothing the new sovereign could not do.

"What is the matter?" questioned Vasili. "Why are you so sober; why are you so still? Oh, you English, cold as a stone!"

But Allard did not hear, he was watching the next act in the splendid drama, when, as former Regent and first kinsman of the Emperor, Stanief moved forward to offer his homage.

"Not here," Allard implored mutely, his eyes on the golden central figure, his hands clenched with nervous dread for the one he loved. "Surely, surely not even Adrian will hurt him here, before these!"

Perhaps the thought of just how humiliating this could be made was also present in Stanief's mind, perhaps some deeper emotion, for there was no trace of color in his firm dark face. Intent, breathless, the church looked on at the meeting, an audience of courtiers and diplomats whom no slightest detail escaped. In her place

Iría laid one hand above her heart where, under velvet and satin, the tiny Spanish cross still rested.

It was over very briefly. As Stanief would have sunk to his knee, Adrian made a quick step forward and prevented the movement.

"Not to me, my cousin," he said quietly. "Not now, at least." And he embraced the other with a touch that lifted the formality to a caress.

The great mass of people remained absolutely still. One would have said there was not a breath drawn or a garment rustled. Stanief himself faltered, shaken out of his stoicism and flushing heavily; it was a perceptible moment before he recovered and carried on his rôle.

"*Nom de Dieu!*" gasped Vasili faintly, clutching his companion's sleeve. "You saw, Allard, you saw?"

Allard saw. He saw Stanief's oath of allegiance given and received, he saw the second embrace which welcomed it; he heard the Emperor's graceful speech of thanks for the long

service completed now. But no one except Stanief himself caught the murmured answer to the quaint, earnest phrases of feudal loyalty:

"For the second time, Feodor."

And to the listener the cathedral faded momentarily at the reminder; the rose-hued salon of the *Nadeja* closed around.

The rest of the affair passed more rapidly. Adrian took Iría's hands as she came to him and kissed her on both cheeks. After that the others came and went, the superb swirl and current rushed on. Once only the eyes of Allard and Stanief met across the broad space, and if they exchanged wordless relief, they held no other feeling in common, for Stanief had never trusted nor understood his cousin less, while Allard had refound the Adrian he knew—the Adrian of evening drives and bittersweet kindness.

In the departure from the cathedral there came a brief confusion and rearrangement.

"You will ride with me," Adrian said to his late Regent, on the steps.

"Sire—"

"Take care; I am too new an autocrat for contradiction."

So Iría went surrounded by her butterfly ladies, and Stanief rode by the Emperor's side during that bewildering return.

In the streets there was no high-bred reserve; seeing him there, the capital went into a madness of enthusiasm.

The rest of the day, the state banquet, passed in no less dazzling excitement. But in the midst of all Adrian found an instant to toss a word to Allard.

"Is it 'almost,' or quite, to-day?" he demanded.

Happy, dazed, uncomprehending yet content, Allard met the challenging eyes in an expressive glance; then for the first time in their years together, he impulsively stooped and touched his lips to the slim young hand.

"Not at all, sire," he answered most remorsefully.

Adrian's long lustrous eyes opened; perhaps no conquest of the day pleased him more.

"Come to me at five o'clock," he directed, and passed on.

Five o'clock. That hour had been generally accepted through the palace as the time when the Emperor would withdraw to snatch a brief rest before the celebrations of the night. From long custom Allard knew where the "come to me" signified, and very pleasant he found his return to the familiar routine. Somewhat before the time appointed, he went to the octagonal library, the room now flooded with quivering pink light from the approaching sunset.

A man turned from a window at his entrance.

"Ah, Monsieur Allard?" said Dalmorov's thin, cutting voice, "Pardon that I disturb you, dear monsieur, but the Emperor requested me to meet him here, and so—"

Allard surveyed the lean and suave diplomat with his usual antagonism, but moved toward a chair instead of adopting the hint to retire.

"I am here for the same reason, Baron," he explained. "A wonderful day we have had, have we not?"

"Wonderful, indeed," Dalmorov conceded viciously. "But the ides of March have not gone, monsieur."

"What a suggestion for our young Cæsar!" Allard deprecated. "Whom do you imagine as Brutus, Baron, in our peaceful Empire?"

"You misunderstood; I only pointed out the uncertainty of building upon one day."

Anxiety for Stanief stabbed Allard, always and only for Stanief. Yet his answer was light and sympathetic:

"Has to-day disappointed you? So sorry, *chèr* Baron."

"No, monsieur; for the event of the day I shall most enjoy is just about to take place."

"And my presence threatens to postpone it? It is too bad I can not do as you suggested, and leave."

"Not at all; it will increase my pleasure to

have you here, Monsieur Allard. Meanwhile, the favor of princes is uncertain, and a frail shield."

Again that coldly triumphant glance, the tightening of the lines about the thin lips. Wilfully Allard misapplied the last sentence.

"Oh, if my poor influence with the Emperor can aid you, Baron! You know how I esteem you."

The click of the lock prevented the exasperated Dalmorov's retort. Stanief held open the door, then followed Adrian into the room. There was no distinction of rank in the surprise with which the three men looked at one another, and from one another to the Emperor who had brought them together. A thrill of startled expectation ran from each to the other like a thread of flame.

'Adrian without his muffling draperies of cloth-of-gold was again the well-known figure of every-day. Yet there was some subtle difference in his bearing, in the carriage of his small

head, which left no doubt that the ceremony of the morning had been very real. It was characteristic that he went to his object without preamble or delay.

"Feodor," he said as he moved to the large central table, and the languid sweetness of his accent was a sufficient warning of danger to those who knew him, "it is unfortunate to be forced to mingle serious affairs with a day already so full, but Baron Dalmorov urges so vigorously the necessity for readjusting the government that I have consented. You will hardly believe that his anxiety leaves neither of us an hour's repose. Will you assist us in this task?"

"If I can, sire," Stanief answered gravely. The kitten was playing with the mice; too well had the Regent learned his deceptive ward for him to draw confidence from the Emperor's courtesy during the day.

"Who else, cousin?" returned Adrian, with exquisite grace. "Who can do so well? How

should the country continue without the wise hand that has guided it through these three years? Pray reassure Baron Dalmorov by telling him that you will still hold in fact the power that nominally you resigned this morning, always aided by my loving support."

Allard grasped the back of a chair; so much even he had never hoped. Stupefied, Dalmorov gazed paling at Adrian, who leaned tranquilly against the table, his lips curved in a very slight cold smile.

"If you indeed speak seriously, sire, I can have but one reply," Stanief said. "Forgive me for the doubt."

"Since I have taught you it, why not? But the farce is over, the game closed. Dalmorov, pray attend; possibly you also may be interested in the explanation that my cousin asks." For the first time his glance went that way. "At least you best can understand why this game has been played. For a game it has been, Feodor. If a cruel one, why, our race is not gentle

nor reared in tenderness. Or to truth, remember that; your mother was an Englishwoman. I give what I have received; you alone ever gave or asked of me frankness. Take it now, if long delayed."

He paused, his lashes fell as if his gaze went back and within. No one moved or spoke as the fire mounted visibly through his calm, shriveling his trained composure and beating against his self-control.

"I love you, my cousin," he said, the quietness forced on his voice leaving it almost monotonous. "I loved you long ago in my lonely childhood, when your rare visits came like sunny flashes across my dreariness and I used to stand at my window to watch you ride by each day. I had no other affections to distract me; I loved you still, however unwillingly, when I went at night to the *Nadeja* three years ago. But you asked me to trust you, and my training had left me no trust to give. Not that I did not want to trust you, for I did want to give that with a longing

you scarcely can understand; but I could not, then. Look back to then, Feodor, for the commencement of the game ended now. Loving you, distrusting all alike, I listened to you when you were with me and listened to your enemies when you were nót, striving to reach the fact beneath in the only method I have seen practised. There could not have been a more unequal battle, yet at the end of the first year you had won. You and Allard had convinced me that there did exist men different from my world. The vista widened for me; I caught a glimpse of a golden age within the one I so despised, the ancient breath of chivalry claimed life beside me. So the second year opened. The second year—" again the cold glance swept Dalmorov. "How did you employ the second year, Baron?"

"Sire—"

With a shrug Adrian turned from him; this time his eyes met his cousin's and held them.

"I have not been happy, Feodor," he resumed, the control not quite so perfect. "For one clean

word of yours, a thousand poisonous speeches were poured into my ears; never a simple action of yours escaped being shown to me as hiding some sinister motive. When you brought order out of the chaotic country, they explained that you prepared your own Empire; when you paid me your grave deference, they told me it was used to lull a fretful child until he could be removed. When you spoke of the day you would yield the sovereignty to me, they laughed. You guessed some of this? All of it you could not conceive, their incredible ingenuity of falsehood and false witness. And hate them as I would, a little of the venom clung. When the beginning of the third year arrived, I stood alone and surveyed it all; older at sixteen, cousin, than you will ever be. On one side lay the reeking swamp they made of life, on the other the firm white road and you. And I realized then that if you failed me, it would not be an Empire I would lose, but a universe and a belief in God. Ask Allard some day how I spent last New Year's Eve."

Allard caught his breath; clearly it stood out in his memory,—that night when Adrian had sent for him near midnight. "Sleep, read, do what you like, but stay where I can see you," had been the curt command. And when dawn had opened grayly across the city, Adrian was still pacing restlessly up and down the fire-lit room, his sorely puzzled companion still watching by the hearth.

"For many months I had held one hope of a definite answer, Feodor, a limit to uncertainty. 'After the coronation I will know,' I told myself. 'If he lays down the scepter, they have lied.' And Dalmorov took from me even that.

" 'He will crown you,' he said, 'because so he can keep the faith of the people and yet rule the country through your weakness and love for him.' "

Stanief would have spoken, deeply moved, but Adrian checked him while himself coloring with no less emotion.

"Wait still a little. I ask you to remember

that never have I taken one step at the suggestion of your enemies or at the wish of this Dalmorov whom you believed my friend. Whichever of us succeeded to Empire, I had the consolation of knowing he would fall. No one has stood between us; alone I decided upon my test and made it, because I had come to the point where I must choose between your world and theirs. I have called this a game—it was the trial of a faith. Need I say the rest? The tax dispute gave the excuse, I feigned a break with you. My cousin, now can you measure the cost to me of the last year?"

He paused for the answer, and finding it written in the mute Stanief's eyes, went on more hurriedly.

"No one knew the truth, although Iría and Allard nearly tempted me to confidence. I deprived you of the faintest hope of peace with me, I left you to the snarling hate and malice of the court; I even added to ingratitude the last insult of menace. Through it all you moved

steadily toward your goal, holding your head above us all. I have learned, at last. If I avoided you, Feodor, it was because I felt my courage failing before yours. If I have spoken to you curtly, it was because I feared to say this too soon. If I refused to see you after the accident last week, it was because I was sick with horror at the nearness of losing you, because I was too near to ending the pretense of months just before its climax. And I had set my heart on standing with you, thus, and defying even this man to find an accusation that you have not answered. So," he took a step forward and passed his hand through Stanief's arm, the last reserve swept away by his own vivid energy. "So, together; now speak, Dalmorov, before you leave the capital. What selfish motive or hope led the Regent to-day when he came to me in the cathedral?"

At the two Dalmorov looked, attempting no reply. Not pleasant to see was his face in that moment. Allard, quivering, radiant, found room

to pity the outgeneraled and annihilated intriguer.

"Nothing?" insisted Adrian, the voice so gentle to his cousin, merciless enough now. "Nothing? Feodor, you see my plaything; never again rate me so low as to credit me with such a favorite. The man who aspired to hold your place; who fancied us both victims of his clumsy intrigues; the man who never even perceived the contempt and dislike I scarcely troubled to conceal, look at him. Dragged from his shadows into the sun, facing you, he has no longer one falsehood to offer."

"Sire," interposed Stanief for very compassion, himself unsteadied by the happiness that makes generosity easy.

Adrian turned on him swiftly.

"You? You, Feodor? Oh, it needed but that! Thank the Grand Duke for his intercession, Baron Dalmorov, and go."

The last humiliation was too much. Sallow with defeat and bitter mortification, Dalmorov

collected himself to strike the only one within reach, the one through whom alone he could wound the others.

"If it has pleased your Imperial Majesty to misunderstand, I may not say misuse, my devotion, I must submit," he said tremulously. "I can do nothing else."

"No, I think not."

"Yet permit me to give a last service due to respect for my sovereign. My defense I leave to time. This nameless American whom it has pleased his Royal Highness to place near your person, sire, is not fit for such an honor. Rather he should be in the mines."

Stanief started violently, his eyes flashing to Allard, who kept his pose with a serenity drawn from utter helplessness.

"Take care, Dalmorov," Adrian cautioned sternly.

The baron bowed.

"Sire, some months ago chance called me to this investigation. There passed through the

city a gentleman who had visited the California Allards a year before this man came here. The visitor declared that this was not the Allard he knew, and no other member of the family had alluded to another absent one. Naturally anxious and alarmed, I searched further. The officers of the *Nadeja* admitted that no one had seen the new secretary until one night his Royal Highness brought him hurriedly aboard, while the yacht lay opposite an American prison. At the exact hour of his arrival, the alarm was raised on shore of the escape of a convict. It is a singular coincidence, sire."

"It is very uninteresting, Baron. What of it?"

"Sire, only loyalty could make me continue. I obtained some journals of that date and a little later. The prisoner who escaped was not recaptured; and out in California the gentleman died whose honorable name this man claims. Give me time, long enough to send to America, and I can find proof that your Imperial Majesty's

favorite companion is the prisoner Leroy masquerading as one who is not living to contradict him. Why the Grand Duke placed him here, it is not for me to say."

Twice Stanief had moved to speak, and each time the restraining hand on his arm had imposed silence.

"Hush, Feodor; this is my affair," Adrian said, divining the rebellion at this last before it could take speech. "Baron Dalmorov, with time you could no doubt make any proofs you desire; I have seen it done. We close this subject to-day. Are you willing to relieve the baron's cares, Allard?"

So near the truth, and yet so far from it, had the accusation gone. It was not of himself Allard thought at the moment, but of Stanief, Stanief, who had protected him and who must be shielded from the consequence.

"Sire, I am John Allard," he replied, giving that fact with the appeal of sincerity. "The Allard to whom Baron Dalmorov refers was my

brother Robert. For the rest, it is perfectly true that I was not in California the year before I came here. The American who did not recognize me was of course my brother's guest during my absence."

"You do not comprehend," Adrian corrected sweetly. "I never intended to ask you to defend yourself against this chain of absurdities. I do not admire your assailant's methods, and I adopt my own. I would ask if both you and Dalmorov will be content with the evidence of a witness who knew the California Allards beyond dispute."

"Certainly, sire," he answered, wondering, yet welcoming any course that led them from New York.

"Sire, if any Californian identifies this man, of course my case fails," conceded Dalmorov with his bitter smile. "But, it will not be so."

"Pray ring the bell, Allard, twice," directed Adrian.

They waited in silence. Adrian moved to a

chair. Stanief sought Allard's eyes with the steadying message of his own, an intensity of reassurance and protection. In reserve he was holding his own power to ruin Dalmorov, and he fiercely reproached himself with not having foreseen and used it before this could have happened.

But Allard showed no agitation to his keen watchers. It seemed to him that this had been closing around him for days, that he had felt the old things reclaiming him as the unseen net drew and tightened. Now there was nothing he could do; the moment balanced, ready to fall either way at the light touch of chance. Away from himself he laid the decision, before a higher tribunal than Adrian's, setting all his life against one error. The speech of his thought was the same as it once was on the wharf before the Hudson prison: "If I have paid—" Quietly, with a dignity all unconscious, he awaited the judgment.

A rustle of silken garments, a silver echo of

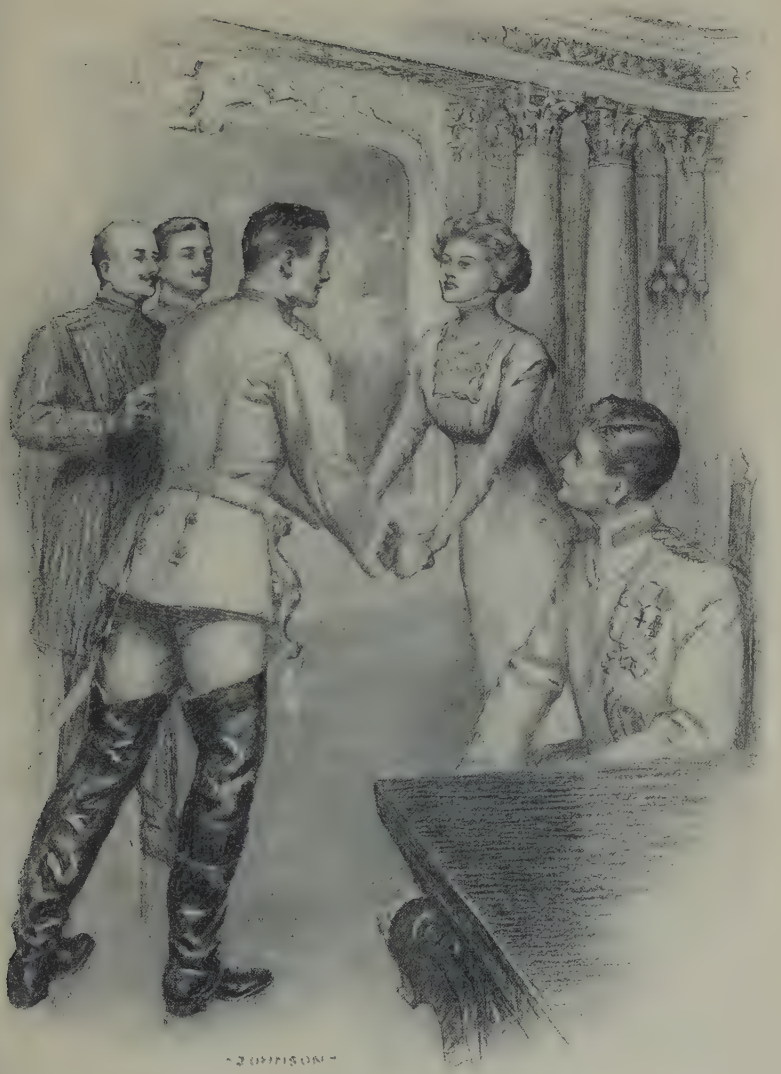
a southern voice as the door opened, and Iría was in the room, Iría, flushed, smiling, and by her side a girl in white whom two of those present had never seen. As the Duchess swept her graceful salute to the Emperor, Allard's cry rang through the place:

"Theodora! Theodora!"

His answer was given. The girl held out her hands as he sprang forward to clasp them; there existed no one else for either during the long moment when they remained gazing in each other's eyes with the hunger of years.

Smiling, Adrian moved forward a chair for Iría, whispering a phrase in passing which sent the light blushes to her forehead as she glanced shyly at Stanief. Then, Theodora slipping her fingers from Allard's with confused recollection of their situation, the Emperor claimed her attention.

"Mademoiselle Leslie, let me present to you the Baron Sergius Dalmorov, formerly of this court. And, since he appears suffering under a



There existed no one else for either Page 320

strange misconception, do me the favor of informing him who is the gentleman whom you have just greeted."

Evidently Theodora knew Adrian, for she answered his smile with trustful friendliness while acknowledging the introduction.

"Monsieur le Baron, I am charmed," she said in her pretty, hesitating French. "This is my cousin, John Leslie Allard, whom I have not seen for many years. We grew up together; and in the pleasure of meeting him again—"

"Thank you, mademoiselle," interposed Adrian. "Let me complete the aid to your halting memory, Dalmorov, and recall in Monsieur Allard my loyal friend of three years' trial, the gentleman who bears the scar and the decorations gained in defense of my life and my cousin's. Several months ago you first hinted at this attack on him. Knowing you very well, I obtained the necessary details from him under a pretext, and myself wrote to Madame Leslie suggesting that she bring mademoiselle here for

the coronation. A week ago they arrived at the Hôtel Anglais, where I had the pleasure of visiting them one evening." He looked at Allard in cool amusement, but it was something very far from amusement that rose in the gray eyes in answer to the memories of that evening. "We explained a few details to one another; since then they have been the guests of the Grand Duchess, who promised me secrecy."

"I did not even tell you, Feodor," murmured Iría plaintively.

"Feodor will forgive you," assured Adrian. "Baron Dalmorov, you have our permission to retire from the capital at once; you are not suited for court life. Unfortunately you have broken no laws. I wish most sincerely that it were in my power to find some excuse for punishing you as I should enjoy; I have no doubt at least one exists. But you may go, and in future avoid the same city with me. That is all; I have waited a long while for to-day."

Stanief turned to Allard, then expressively

regarded the man who moved almost gropingly toward the door.

"Shall I give the excuse?" the glance asked.

And Allard's impulsive gesture answered.

"Has he not enough?" flashed the mute return.

The door closed gently.

CHAPTER XX

CLOSED

BEYOND, the marble arches, the brilliancy, the color and movement of the vast ballroom; here, the perfumed dusk of the conservatory's mimic garden, lighted by tiny jeweled lamps hung among the flowers. And over both atmospheres the dreamlike enchantment of the strange national music that Adrian loved. Sighing, Allard leaned forward, his eyes delighting in contemplation of the girl opposite.

"To see you like this! Theodora, I have so sorrowfully pictured you as changed, as grieved and saddened out of the brightness I so longed to keep for you. And you are the same, always the same, dear."

She smiled, half-tenderly, half in indulgent mockery.

"But I am not the same, nor are you, John. I am twenty-five instead of nineteen, and much wiser than Theo Leslie used to be. While you—his excellency Monsieur Allard of the imperial household, is somewhat older and much more dignified, and a trifle more interesting. When I see you moving through this court with so much ease, in all your gorgeousness so naturally worn,"—she made a laughing gesture to the gemmed orders—"I think—I think perhaps it is well we have both grown."

The truth of the judgment held him, and sent a startled hope.

"If we have grown nearer, Theo?"

"I have tried to say—that. Can you guess how mamma and I have followed you through scattered newspaper articles and items of European news? How we rejoiced and cried together when you saved the Emperor from death and were yourself wounded, when your name was everywhere? You wrote so seldom, and never to me."

"I thought you must hate me for leaving Robert; I never forgot that."

Her vivid face grew serious, her eyes fell to the fan in her lap.

"I could never have felt so, whatever you had done. John, the last morning he spoke to us, Robert said that for us you had made a sacrifice we could not even conceive. He told us that we must never question you nor seek to know, but that you were above all blame. Perhaps I had already guessed you were not happy, remembering the night before you went away."

"There was never one like Robert," he said, gratitude a pain. "Theodora, I never wondered that you loved him."

She stirred, the faint, familiar sweetness of sandalwood and rose was shaken from her laces by the movement; wide and very soft were the eyes she lifted to his.

"I did not love him, as you meant. John, John, you were wrong."

The conservatory wavered before his gaze; he rose impetuously and she with him.

"Wrong? Then—"

"You, John. Oh, could you not tell a girl's playmate from her lover? Robert read the truth; and I believe he was glad. John—"

Slowly, almost fearfully, he drew her to his arms.

"Wrong! Oh, Theo, it has all been wrong, and the fault mine! That out of it all should come to-day, my dear, my dear."

Presently she slipped from him, starrily radiant, leaving her hands in his as she looked up.

"Do you know how I found courage to tell you this, John?"

"You knew I loved you all my life."

"But it was so very long, so very long; you might have forgotten or changed. No, it was because the night he came to our hotel, the Emperor told me that you cared for me still. 'That is why I brought you here, mademoiselle,' he said. 'What he gives once, he gives for ever, this Allard of ours.' And so I ventured."

Allard looked out across the flower-draped arches to the ball-room beyond. Stately, self-

contained, Stanief was moving down the floor between the parting throngs of guests, the gently glad Iría at his side. From his seat Adrian leaned forward to watch them, his keen, dark young face softened to a great content.

"When we do wrong, sometimes we are allowed to make our payment, if we try," he said dreamily. "But how can we pay our debt of unearned happiness, Theodora?"

Smiling, she drew nearer.

"You have the man's justice, John; now learn the woman's art of graciousness. Unquestioningly let us accept our gifts."

He turned to her, flushing, and took her hands.

"It is that! Thank you, Theo. The account is closed; the rest—commences."

THE END